

INNOVATIONS SERIES

Innovations in  
**English language teaching  
for migrants and refugees**

Edited by David Mallows

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# Foreword

Melissa Cudmore

The British Council is very pleased to introduce the ‘Innovations in...’ series. This collection aims to bring to the reader a wealth of ideas and practices in English language teaching, and to stimulate new thinking and experimentation, by providing accounts of innovative experiences from a range of national and international contexts. The focus of this particular volume is on English language teaching for migrants and refugees.

The British Council has a long-standing record of international engagement with the field of English language teaching. We have recently started to extend our work to the UK, connecting with the ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) communities by launching our first ESOL-specific website, a substantial resource for the community: <http://esol.britishcouncil.org>

Increasingly, we organise events that bring together practitioners from not only the ESOL community, but also teachers from EAL (English as an additional language) and EFL (English as a foreign language) communities, many of whom share the same passions, beliefs and approaches, but have not always had the chance to meet, learn from each other and build networks.

By commissioning papers for this volume from diverse areas, we hope to stimulate further discussion, by highlighting the common ground, and providing a range of thought-provoking perspectives and insights. We hope too that the volume will encourage further collaboration and innovative thinking in the future, and contribute to the ongoing strengthening of the profession.

**Melissa Cudmore**

*Senior Adviser, English and Examinations, British Council*

# Introduction

This book is about the teaching of English to migrants and refugees. It is written from the perspective of those who work with and teach this diverse group of adults and children. Migrants and refugees come from very different geographical areas and have left their home countries for very different reasons. They may have come to the UK to join a spouse, to seek job opportunities or to flee violence and persecution. They will have had very different experiences of education: some will have had no formal schooling and others will have studied to a high level and hold relevant academic and professional qualifications. Some will join settled communities, while others will be living in isolation. Immigration in the United Kingdom is a central policy area, whereas education is devolved to the four nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). As the majority of the chapters in this book are written about English contexts, English education policy is the focus of this introduction.

The UK has a long history of inward migration and holds a great deal of expertise in the teaching of English to those who arrive on its shores seeking a better life. For these new arrivals, learning English is of primary concern. For adults, language proficiency opens doors to social acceptance, economic security and cultural understanding; for children it is the key to social and academic success at school.

In this book we are concerned with English language teaching in a country in which English is the dominant language of a substantial, often monolingual, majority and learners need English to communicate in their daily life. Many readers will likely come to this volume from the field of English language teaching (ELT). Some will consider themselves as teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), working in countries where English is not the home language of the majority of the population. The work of ELT described by the writers of the chapters is necessarily distinct from that carried out in EFL classrooms in much of the world. It is more heavily context-dependent and more implicated in the social and economic realities of the host country. It is also primarily public sector funded and is thus integrated with, and influenced by, other related education services and wider government policies.

In England, under this broad umbrella of ELT professional practice, the teaching of English to migrants and refugees falls into two areas, each with its own distinct professional identity and, of course, its own acronym. Work with young people in school settings is generally referred to as English as an additional language (EAL) whereas with adults it is known as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL).

English language teaching with adult and child migrants and refugees in England used to come under the banner of English as a second language (ESL). However, while educational policy in England remains doggedly and proudly monolingual, there are many more bilingual or multilingual individuals in the world than there are monolingual. English is very frequently not the second or even the third language that migrants and refugees and their children have learned. In multilingual homes, it is common for members to be accustomed to speaking two or more languages from their earliest years and therefore English as a Second Language is an inadequate description. The complex multilingualism characteristic of many minority

language users also makes it difficult to identify a ‘first’ language or a mother tongue. For this reason, all of the chapters in this volume refer to ‘home languages’ rather than mother tongue or first language.

Readers may expect to find more in the chapters that distinguishes the practice of EAL and ESOL teachers than that joins it. They work in different phases and sites of learning, have separate professional associations, and little reference is made in ESOL teacher education to EAL pedagogy or vice versa. However, in compiling this volume I have found the opposite to be true. The writers appear to be drawing on a similar body of knowledge, grounded in sophisticated language awareness, theories of second language acquisition and socio-cultural understanding. Whatever their professional formation and prior experiences, they are all language teachers working with often vulnerable and disadvantaged groups of learners.

This is an interesting moment to stop and reflect on the distinctiveness and the shared knowledge, skills and understanding of EAL and ESOL. There have been recent attempts at professionalisation of both the workforces, with differing strategies, levels of commitment and success, and there is increasing overlap in their institutional settings, particularly with the 14–19 age group, which forms a distinct middle ground. It is within this age group that the barriers between EAL and ESOL most clearly break down, allowing us to consider more carefully what we actually mean by EAL and ESOL.

For those working in a school setting, EAL is seen as curriculum-facing. Its primary purpose is to aid the young person in accessing the mainstream school curriculum, not to help them learn English for its own sake. As a consequence EAL teachers are required to interact with mainstream teachers and, where possible, to influence their pedagogical approach, supporting them in creating a more accessible classroom environment.

For young people who have arrived in their early teens, and whose language skills require such development that they are unlikely to be able to meaningfully access the curriculum in time to complete examinations at 16, it is common to hear reference to ESOL rather than EAL. In this context ESOL is understood as curriculum-independent, focused on language learning rather than curriculum learning and usually takes place away from the rest of the student body in individual or small group withdrawal sessions.

ESOL as curriculum-independent and EAL as curriculum-facing is an interesting and useful distinction that we can also use to understand the adult sphere and its professional links to EAL. Mainstream adult ESOL classes in further education colleges and elsewhere are generally curriculum-independent with a primary focus on language development. However, many adult migrants and refugees are enrolled on courses leading to vocational qualifications in which vocational and language aims are integrated. In this type of course, generally known as embedded ESOL, the language teaching and learning is also curriculum-facing.

For both EAL and ESOL teachers in England the first decade of the 21st Century was a period of change with two major government initiatives, the National Strategies in schools and the Skills for Life strategy in post-compulsory education, having

a profound impact on teachers and learners. In the schools sector the National Strategies was a '*systematic attempt at a national level to drive improvements in standards through a focused programme of managing changes in the way that core subjects are taught in classrooms*' (DfE 2012). Skills for Life was the national strategy for improving adult literacy, language and numeracy skills. It led to the introduction of the adult ESOL Core Curriculum, standardised national tests for learners and new teacher training qualifications. In engaging teachers in structured professional development and investing in a coherent learning infrastructure, the National Strategies and Skills for Life have loomed large in the working lives of teachers and their learners' experiences in the classroom. Both policies were part of what has been described as the new public sector managerialism. With a focus on issues of economic efficiency and increasing productivity, they were characterised by massive centralised control and a consequent loss of autonomy for teachers.

Neither the National Strategies, nor Skills for Life, nor the New Labour government that introduced them is with us any more. The chapters in this collection suggest ways in which teachers of migrants and refugees are freeing themselves of the recent prescription and centralisation inherent in national education policy. The teachers in this volume question some of the assumptions that lay beneath the surface of the National Strategies, Skills for Life and other New Labour policy initiatives. The creative approaches of many of the authors of the chapters in this collection may be taken as evidence that the yoke is off and teachers are beginning to explore the new freedoms afforded them, with fascinating results. There is evidence of the development of more critical pedagogies, with questioning of the role of the teacher and learner and a desire to centre the learning on the experience, knowledge and needs of the individual. We hear directly from learners as they describe the place of language and language learning in their lives and there is reference to '*bringing the outside in*' (Cooke and Roberts 2007), drawing on learners' own experiences and lives outside the classroom to develop teaching and learning resources and strategies.

A few notes of clarification are needed to aid the reader unfamiliar with one or other context or indeed both. With net immigration into the UK of around 252,000 per year, there has been high demand for ESOL classes with participation rising throughout the period of the Skills for Life strategy.

ESOL provision in England is generally organised with reference to five different levels. These are shown below with their rough equivalence to Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels and to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

- Entry level 1/CEFR A1/SCQF 2
- Entry level 2/CEFR A1(A2)/SCQF 3
- Entry level 3/CEFR A2/SCQF 4
- Level 1/CEFR B1/SCQF 5
- Level 2/CEFR B2(C1)/SCQF 6

In English schools children who speak languages other than English are increasing in number year-on-year. There are currently a million five- to 16-year olds in English



schools who are bilingual or multilingual. The 2012 annual schools census shows that EAL learners now represent 17.5 per cent of all pupils in English primary schools and 12.9 per cent of all pupils in English secondary schools<sup>1</sup>. In urban areas this rises – more than half the children in inner London schools are now thought to be EAL learners.

Teaching and learning in most English state schools is organised around five key stages as in the table below.

Key Stage	Year	Age	School type
1	1–2	5–7	Primary school
2	3–6	7–11	
3	7–9	11–14	Secondary school
4	10–11	14–16	
5	12–13	16–18	Sixth form college, secondary school or further education college

The sites for EAL and ESOL provision are different, though some ESOL classes for parents take place in schools and learners at Key Stage 4 or 5 may be studying at further education (FE) college, in the same environment as ESOL learners, and are often taught by the same ESOL teachers. Responsibility for EAL and ESOL sits in different government departments.

The chapters in this volume are organised chronologically. There are three chapters with a focus on primary education, four secondary, one 16–19 and six adult ESOL. While we used the phase of education as an organising principle, many of the ideas discussed could be equally applied to other age groups. For example, the biographical approaches described by Dina Mehmedbegović have also been used successfully with primary children and with adults, as has the Creative ESOL approach.

## Primary

### Writing bilingual stories: developing children’s literacy through home languages – Justine Dakin

Justine uses a case study approach to describe a successful primary school project in which pupils learning EAL created illustrated books in English and their home language with the collaboration of their parents and other community members. The children had different levels of literacy in English and in their home languages. Justine demonstrates how the project enabled them to combine and enhance their skills to produce their bilingual texts and reflects on the importance of valuing children’s home languages and literacies.

### Developing vocabulary in a multilingual classroom – Latika Davis

Latika focuses on the explicit learning and teaching of vocabulary across the primary school curriculum. She argues for a clear focus on developing academic vocabulary and shares some of the successful strategies used by teachers in primary classrooms

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<sup>1</sup> Figure taken from the NALDIC website: [www.naldic.org.uk/research-and-information](http://www.naldic.org.uk/research-and-information)

to generate an interest in words and provide a collaborative learning environment which encourages risk taking by EAL pupils.

### **Valuing home languages – Clare Wardman, Judith Bell and Emma Sharp**

Clare and colleagues describe the journey taken by Judith and Emma, two monolingual class-teachers in north-west England, over 18 months as they complete a postgraduate-level accredited teacher training course and reflect on the changes it has brought to their classroom practices. In particular the chapter looks at what Judith and Emma implemented in the school as a result: a ‘language-buddies’ scheme and a ‘Pashto club’. They describe how this professional development activity has significantly raised the confidence of the EAL workforce through increasing understanding of second language acquisition and associated strategies for working in heritage languages alongside English.

## **Secondary**

### **Teaching and learning in diverse school contexts: the journeys of three newly-arrived students – Dimitrina Kaneva**

In this chapter we meet Dalmar, Toni and Rafael, three recently arrived migrant children at an inner-city secondary school in the north-west of England catering for over 900 students aged 11 to 16. EAL pupils comprise nearly 80 per cent of the school population. Through a detailed account of their stories Dimitrina describes the multiple models of support used by the school to meet the needs and learning styles of students with EAL and discusses the impact of extreme diversity on the organisation of teaching and learning resources at the school.

### **In search of the highest level of learner engagement: autobiographical approaches with children and adults – Dina Mehmedbegović**

Dina describes her efforts, as a teacher new to working with migrant and refugee children, to develop an approach which could engage children at different levels of English proficiency, and with different levels of literacy skills in any of the languages they use. Although it is widely accepted that good teaching takes as its starting point that children and adults in any classroom are the most valuable resources, they are often overlooked and underutilised in teaching and learning processes. All too often curriculum and teaching appear disconnected and irrelevant to children’s lives. Dina explores the use of personal narratives with a Year 7 class in a secondary school and encourages others to look for ways which will enable them to exploit autobiographical approaches for the benefits of enhanced participation, achievement and intercultural competencies.

### **Curriculum innovations for students learning EAL in mainstream state secondary schools: a cross-curricular EAL pedagogy for teacher development – Sara Green**

Sara focuses on the professional development needs of teachers in secondary schools through an exploration of content-language integration, defined as teaching and learning subject content and English language at the same time. She describes content-language integration in practice through the development of a range of content-language integrated EAL courses and curriculum options and argues that

knowledge and expertise in addressing the distinctive content-language needs of EAL learners in the curriculum is essential for teachers working in ethno-linguistically diverse schools.

### **Creative ESOL: the power of participatory arts in language acquisition – Eleanor Cocks and Theah Dix**

Eleanor and Theah explore an innovative, creative approach to supporting newly-arrived young migrants and refugees with their English language development. ‘Creative ESOL’ is an arts and language programme which works with young people aged 11 to 16 to improve their English language skills through drama and the arts. ‘Creative ESOL’ draws on applied theatre practice encouraging participants to explore culture, emotion and imagination through drama activities. The teaching approach adopted is grounded in critical pedagogy, recognising that young people should become active agents in their own learning.

## **16–19 further education**

### **Class blogging in ESOL – Richard Gresswell and James Simpson**

Richard and James draw on specific examples of class blogging projects in 16–19 ESOL provision in a further education college to explore, from practice and theoretical perspectives, the issues, challenges and opportunities, of introducing new digital media into the young adult ESOL classroom. They show how learners encountered, engaged with and used digital technology for productive learning experiences and how their use of digital media enabled them to overcome some of the literacy challenges they face.

## **Adult ESOL**

### **Providing emotional support to ESOL and EAL students – Thomas L Lloyd**

Thomas explores the issues faced by teachers when their learners disclose a traumatic event from their past, or one which is still present in their life today. EAL and ESOL teachers often work with learners who have been through traumatic experiences prior to arriving in the UK. Thomas offers guidance on finding best practice in relation to these issues for both sectors of language teaching.

### **The use of mobile technologies as a bridge to enhance learning for ESOL students – Carol Savill-Smith, Rekha Chopra and Octavia Haure**

Through two case studies, three experienced ESOL practitioners address the use of new technologies, specifically mobile technologies, for learning by ESOL students. The ways the technologies were used for teaching and learning are described, with a particular focus on how they were introduced into the curriculum, the resources created by the teachers and how they were used by the learners. The authors demonstrate the innovative and useful role that mobile devices can play in helping people, whose first language is not English, to learn, understand and interact with the host community.

### **The personal made impersonal and the impersonal made personal: reading circles and language learning – Sam Duncan**

Sam draws on three case studies of reading circles within formal and informal adult education to explore reading circles as a language practice and pedagogy, as a vehicle for student-led differentiation, and as a 'negotiated syllabus'. She shows that reading circles are an authentic adult literacy practice, and a way of working which involves not only adult topics but adult ways of working: mutuality, shared responsibility and a sharing of expertise.

### **ESOL in the Hebrides and Island Voices – 'Hey, hang on a minute, tha mise bilingual!' – Gordon Wells**

Gordon deals with a juxtaposition of technological 'newness' and community 'tradition'. Through a case study set in the Outer Hebrides he relates how aspects of both, often treated as opposing forces, can be harnessed in pursuit of a holistic, bilingual enrichment programme that seeks (among other things) to aid the development of ESOL skills in a small but significant migrant population as part of a community-wide language and media promotional strategy.

### **Responsive teaching and learner centredness – Sam Shepherd**

Sam describes a learner-centred ESOL classroom asking what would happen if we responded to the needs and demands of the learners in the classroom rather than sticking to, or even being restrained by, teacher-set objectives. He argues for a truly learner-centred classroom practice taking as its starting point not the pre-assessed and pre-planned content of the course or lesson, but instead the language and the ideas that the learners bring to the classroom.

### **A 'social turn' in ESOL? – John Sutter**

John explores the recent growth in ESOL teachers' interest in approaches to language teaching that have roots in the two related fields of EFL and literacy teaching: Dogme and Reflect for ESOL. He assesses what these approaches mean for ESOL practice, and suggests that they represent a 'social turn' in language teaching pedagogy recognising that the processes by which a language (or literacy) is acquired are not purely cognitive. Instead, there is a recognition that language is a social, co-operative phenomenon, and that language learning and meaning making are themselves products of social contexts and interactions.

## **Conclusion**

The definition of innovation being used in this British Council series of publications is a broad one encompassing not just innovation in practice in the form of particular teaching methodologies, course design or materials that appear to be successful in a certain context, but also innovation in the description or conceptualisation of key issues faced by teachers. And it is in terms of conceptualisation that the volume as a whole can be most influential.

EAL and ESOL teachers are focused on supporting migrants and their children and there is increasing overlap in their institutional settings, particularly with 14- to 19-year olds. Impending policy developments in harmonising Qualified Teacher Status and Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills, following the recommendations

of the Wolf review (DfE 2011), may open the way for ESOL teachers to be employed directly by schools, making it increasingly important and indeed productive for professionals in EAL and ESOL to work more closely together.

By presenting EAL and ESOL as *English language teaching for migrants and refugees* the common ground between the two becomes increasingly apparent. Many teachers work, or have worked, in both EAL and ESOL, with the 16–19 group of learners being a distinct middle ground. Recent experiences of professionalisation of both the ESOL and EAL workforces make this a particularly interesting time to stop and reflect on the distinctiveness and the shared knowledge, skills and understanding of the two professions.

I hope you agree that the chapters in this volume, as well as being thought-provoking and enjoyable, demonstrate that there is great potential for more formalised and structured collaboration between EAL and ESOL practitioners.

David Mallows  
November 2012

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**Writing bilingual  
stories: developing  
children's literacy  
through home  
languages**

# 1

## Writing bilingual stories: developing children’s literacy through home languages

Justine Dakin

*When I go to Paris, my relatives speak German and I speak English,  
so to communicate we have to speak Tamil.*

Rabeena, Year 5.

### Introduction

Language, above all else, is what makes us human. It enables us to think, feel, act, communicate and define who we are in different contexts and at different times in our lives. In England there is a wonderful mix of cultures, religions and languages which, in an increasingly globalised world, provides young people with opportunities to learn and be enriched through a mutual exchange of stories and experiences. Most migrants bring with them language skills that carry enormous potential benefits in today’s diverse society. Yet the dominance of English in our schools, driven by a high-stakes testing regime, requires many primary pupils to leave their bilingualism outside the school gates and step into an essentially monolingual culture. A child’s other languages are positioned as separate from school, the responsibility of parents and the community – and, crucially, of little use in attaining literacy in English. This overlooks the wealth of evidence that shows that knowledge of one language supports the learning of another, and that literacy skills are transferable.

Although there are many possible definitions of the terms bilingualism and bilingual, I use them here to describe users of two or more languages who may speak, read and write each language equally, or have uneven oracy and literacy competencies in different languages. While teachers are often aware that children access additional learning beyond school, they can struggle to include community-based resources as part of a meaningful and inclusive curriculum. In English schools ‘multi-cultural’ days or weeks are sometimes organised as a form of inclusive practice to celebrate and explore different cultural heritages. Although these events do focus on home languages, often through story-telling sessions, music or drama, they only offer a cursory and potentially stereotypical view of what and who people are.

However, this is not always the case. I would like to share a small project that one English primary school carried out to celebrate the literacy and linguistic skills of its bilingual learners. Even though some of the project involved work outside

the mainstream classroom it added enormously to the children's personal sense of inclusion and identity. Combining skills in their home languages and English gave value and status to their other languages in ways that traditional classroom pedagogies do not. As well as boosting the children's self-confidence, it provided them with opportunities to be independent learners. It also built on prior knowledge, setting high expectations for pupils at very different stages of acquiring English, and, rather than focusing on what each child could not do, uncovered personal strengths. Above all, it valued the children as individuals.

## The pupils

A group of pupils in Years 4, 5 and 6 (aged 8–10 years old) were invited to write stories in their home languages and English to create additional bilingual books for the library. The children and I met in the school library for an hour each week during the spring term. Using the limited resources at our disposal, we constructed a working space that used a newly carpeted area with round spongy cushions, two circular tables surrounded by coloured chairs, a single computer and the hundreds of books arranged on shelves around us. The room became a working space and a haven, not merely for sharing resources, but for experimenting with new ideas, new skills and new identities. Over ten weeks the children made a variety of different books that reflected their personal skills and strengths.

Rabeena (Year 5), who was highly literate in Tamil, and Estela (Year 4), who spoke Bosnian at home and was just learning to read and write it at a community school, collaborated on a project together. Having produced an English version of *The Wolf and the Seven Kids*, a traditional story familiar to both of them, they translated it into their respective home languages and created a tri-lingual book.

Aliya (Year 5) adapted the traditional English tale of *Little Red Riding Hood* and set it in her homeland of Tanzania. She called the main character Red Dress and transformed the wolf into Wild Dog. Written in Swahili and English, *Red Dress* reflected Aliya's African roots and her British identity.

Baahir (Year 6) chose to re-tell a school assembly story with a strong anti-bullying message. He did so in Norwegian, his second language, and then translated it into English, his third language, Ethiopian, was reserved for family interactions at home.

Gabrielle (Year 6), a gifted and talented pupil, surprised me when she declined the opportunity to compose her own narrative or to re-tell a familiar story. Instead she opted to translate her favourite French story, *Ma Vie de Sorcière*, into English. Although this activity was different from the original aim of creating a text in her home language and English, it suited Gabrielle's individuality. It provided her with a considerable intellectual challenge, which is what she thrived on in class, and continued to develop her literacy skills in French and English.

Polish speaking Casmir (Year 5) struggled to compose a coherent story in English or his home language possibly because of limited exposure to this type of genre. After trying a variety of scaffolds, I suggested he might like to design a photographic information book instead. This use of visual media led to the creation of a school



guide for new Polish parents and children, explaining the physical geography of the site and some of the school routines. Armed with my digital camera, he took full responsibility for photographing different areas of the school at different times. At home, he catalogued the photographs into groups and wrote captions in Polish. His mum provided him with her Polish/English dictionary which he brought into school to use. With the help of a multi-lingual assistant he extended both his written Polish and English. Here is an example from his text:

*And now – attention please – the best class in the school: YEAR 5! (my class ©). In Year 5 we have got Peeper – the gerbil. We also have got the class library with many interesting books.*

*A teraz prosze o uwage – najlepsza klasa w szkole- klasa 5 (moja klasa ©). W naszej Sali mamy chomika – Peepera. Mamy rowniez klasowa biblioteczke z wieloma interesujacymi ksiazkami.*

Estela summarised the whole experience as ‘fun’, not a word that is necessarily bandied around by children when they are asked to write a story or an information text during literacy lessons, but it captured the sheer enthusiasm with which the children approached the task. It also gave them opportunities to express themselves in ways that are not possible during daily classroom interactions where attainment targets dictate the pace and delivery of the curriculum and discourses are generally controlled by teachers rather than students.

In terms of their English acquisition, Estela, Rabeena and Aliya had attended the school for several years and were advanced bilingual learners whose grasp of English language equalled that of their English-speaking peers in most situations. Casmir, Gabrielle and Baahir, on the other hand, had only begun learning English over the previous 12 months. Some of the children were literate in other languages from previous schooling abroad; some were learning new skills at weekend community schools, or from parents. Overall, the children’s language and literacy profiles differed enormously.

To assess the impact of the project I asked the children to complete a simple questionnaire at the end, commenting on different aspects of the work and rating it with a mark out of ten. The following discussion draws on the notes I made during the ten-week project, plus the children’s reflections.

## **Multiple identities shared**

A close camaraderie developed between the students and was an important aspect of the project. Through working together each week, the children gained the confidence to reveal their identities as speakers of other languages in ways that do not often occur in mainstream classrooms. Initially the students were tentative about sharing details of their home languages. They sat on the spongy library cushions and expressed a range of emotions from shyness to dismissiveness, suggesting that speaking their home languages amongst people who wouldn’t understand was a waste of time. However, their attitudes quickly changed. Having the opportunity to hear, exchange and potentially ‘learn another language’ became, as Estela described

it, 'new and exciting'. Gabrielle, a quiet and reserved student, saw the project as 'an opportunity to show people how good I am at speaking French'. This sentiment was echoed by Casmir in Year 5. When asked how the project made him feel, he replied, 'Good. I can speak Polish in school'.

In her evaluation Rabeena wrote,

*I've learned more about Estela ... she spoke Bosnian and that she is a Muslim.  
I DIDN'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT HER!!!*

Rabeena's delight at connecting with another like-minded and talented pupil led to a partnership that produced a multilingual re-telling of the traditional tale *The Wolf and the Seven Kids*. Although from different academic year groups, Estela and Rabeena co-operated together to write, illustrate and construct their book in a way that showed great maturity and empathy. As well as organising the practical tasks between them, such as who would take responsibility for illustrating a certain section, they developed a respect for each other's home languages. Reflecting on the value of the project and her collaboration with Rabeena, Estela wrote, 'I learnt a new language which is Tamil and (the project) helps me improve my Bosnian'. Rabeena expressed similar feelings when she said, 'I've enjoyed investigating more into my home language and working with Estela. I've learned a bit of Bosnian.'

Baahir's experiences of language learning exemplify the changing identities that many young people undergo. He described ten years of transition matter-of-factly, as a normal, fluid progression from one culture to the next:

*I could understand a bit of Norwegian (when) ... I was six. I started learning (Ethiopian) ... when I was small. My dad and mum don't speak Norwegian much. I speak it to my brothers and sisters.*

During lessons at a local mosque, the teacher (Baahir's uncle) sometimes challenged him in Norwegian, adding a plurilingual element to his Arabic studies. Therefore, for students like Baahir, the bilingual books project forged links between learning at home, in the community and in school.

## **A bilingual approach to literacy learning**

As well as positioning the pupils as confident speakers of different languages, the bilingual books project also boosted their literacy skills. Aliya explained how she had 'learned more Swahili since translating some English words', a sentiment Rabeena agreed with when she wrote in her evaluation, 'I've learned more spellings in my language'. The project also provided children with an opportunity to maintain language skills that they felt they were losing. Baahir, who described Norway as 'a good country to live in' wrote, 'I felt happy because I could write Norwegian again' while Gabrielle commented, 'I think writing this book actually made me remember some French words which I totally forgot about'. In this way, the books allowed pupils to regain and build on their existing literacy skills while providing them with the confidence to feel positive about their bilingualism.

Discussions around language and how meanings, concepts and ideas can or cannot be transferred literally from one language to another were valuable in heightening

the children's awareness of translation as a skill. Rabeena wrote, 'I've learned ... I can translate', while Gabrielle reflected that if she were to 'train how to translate better' her work would be improved. Translation, along with a critical use of first language, is a skill that schools rarely have time to encourage and which is often only called upon as a bridge into English, the dominant discourse. Through the bilingual books project children were able to view translation and interpretation as a specialised tool for learning and communication that every one of them had access to, thus positively reinforcing their identities as bilingual or multilingual individuals.

Casmir had the following advice for anyone considering making a bilingual book:

*I would say is easy when you gonna try your best. They would learn about how to make the book. You can do it in calm because if you rushed everything is gonna be not good.*

His advice is insightful and reveals some of the impact the project had on him as an individual learner.

Of all the children involved in the project, Casmir was the pupil who surprised me the most. From being a quiet, unobtrusive, slightly distracted student working well below age-related expectations in English literacy, he transformed into an engaged, enthusiastic, talkative and focused child from the moment I discussed the project with him. He welcomed the opportunity to work 'calmly' and, along with the other children, appreciated the value of drafting and re-drafting his information text and reorganising the photographs until each element was ready to be presented in book form. Casmir wanted to try his 'best' and the project gave him the chance to reveal a different identity – one as a literate Polish bilingual speaker. He projected humour in his work ('And now – attention please – the best class in the school: YEAR 5! [my class 😊]') and revealed a growing maturity that was reflected in his appreciation of the need to work carefully to produce the best results. First to complete his book, he used his experience to encourage his peers with practical advice and even began to plan another book as a follow up.

The ethos of the project meant that every child's home language was considered of equal value and importance. This positive environment encouraged the children to reveal many different talents. Firstly, they learned how to construct a book – from the germ of an idea through a process of writing, translating, illustrating and editing – to making decisions on graphic choices and text content for the title and end pages. Secondly, providing them with brightly coloured folders containing notepads, pens, pencils and sticky notes to keep their manuscripts in, gave the books a status that immediately instilled each pupil with a sense of responsibility for his or her work.

The project also provided the children with opportunities to act and think independently that might not always be available to them in a mainstream classroom setting. Pressure to complete work quickly can often disadvantage pupils learning English as an additional language (EAL) as the curriculum leaps from one topic to the next with little time for consolidation. To paraphrase Casmir, when work is rushed you often fail to produce your best. Finally, the children negotiated help from their parents, siblings or family at home, as well as arranging to meet up with me for

additional sessions. They were active in driving the project forward and taking full ownership of their own, unique pieces of work.

While I acknowledge that the children worked outside their classrooms for this project, I believe that the bilingual literacy model we developed can be adapted to mainstream lessons. The genuine surprise and delight that the children's English-speaking peers showed at the sight of the completed books could lead on to valuable and integrated learning about language, literacy and identity for all children. Cummins (2001) argues that when pupils' language and culture are incorporated into the school curriculum, they are more likely to receive an inclusive and transformative education that advocates for them, rather than against them. Who we are as individuals is too complex to be shared in a day or even a week of multicultural activities. Including children's home languages in lessons would give 'language', as opposed to 'languages' a higher profile. It would offset the status given to the teaching of a modern (often European) language to children at Key Stage 2 (7–11 years old), in favour of recognising the importance of all language. Not only is language a means of communication, it defines who and what we are, how we interact, think and behave. If schools can integrate 'language' learning into their cultures, students will benefit by developing a more critical and analytical approach to literature and its inherent messages.

## Collaborative learning and community links

Collaborative learning is important for the acquisition of any additional language and became a significant strategy during the project. Baahir reflected on the process by saying, 'I was pleased because when we were talking together, we gave each other ideas'. As part of the evaluation, I asked the children to grade the experience with marks out of ten. Aliya graded the experience ten out of ten because 'I had a lot of help from different people, especially my group'. Along with my help, as the teacher organising the project, the children received support from school and home. At school Casmir was helped by a multi-lingual assistant who came in each week to support Polish speaking pupils. Other pupils like Aliya, sought advice from peers who spoke the same home languages and used their skills alongside translation tools on the computer to edit and refine the stories. Parents and family members also became involved at home. Casmir explained, '(A) translator helped me with Polish. And Mum. My mum helped me whole day in computer – writing and choosing pictures.' Gabrielle's older sister also worked alongside her as she translated Chapter One of her favourite French story, *Ma Vie de Sorcière*, into English while Aliya's aunt proof read *Red Dress* and offered lexical alternatives in Swahili.

The collaborative nature of the interaction between the children, their parents and staff encouraged the development of meta-language. For example, I heard Rabeena and Estela discussing alternatives to the word 'terrified' as they sat at the computer together and constructed their English version of *The Wolf and the Seven Kids*. I reflected on how focused and mature they were, negotiating language meaning and form within their joint text. This type of discourse would rarely be heard in mainstream classrooms where the writing of stories is often a solitary and silent endeavour. As a group we also 'noticed' similarities between our respective languages. For example

Estela recognised 'oni' or 'they' in Polish as meaning 'somebody' in Bosnian while Aliya pointed out dialectic differences in the ways Swahili speakers say 'hello'.

## Focused EAL learning

The project allowed me time to work individually with each child, both during the allotted hour each week in the library and also at dinner times. Although my position as a monolingual teacher theoretically limited the support I was able to offer the pupils with their bilingual texts, our discourses around literacy encompassed both English and home languages. During these interactions, we used the English version of the written texts to discuss lexical alternatives to repeated or very 'basic' vocabulary. We examined syntax, tracked pronoun usage, identified omissions and looked at text cohesion in the context of particular genres. However, these conversations also included the comparison of syntax between English and the children's home languages, as well as discussions around semantic meanings and lexical alternatives that encouraged the children to reflect critically in both languages. This close scrutiny provided both the children and I with opportunities to formatively assess their literacy skills. Through discussion and feedback, the children were able to take greater responsibility for their learning and apply it to the texts they were writing. For example, a simple discussion around the use of punctuation (or lack of it) led Baahir to critically examine and revise his English and Norwegian texts, making them both more readable.

As an English speaker with a limited knowledge of French and German to fall back on, I relied heavily on the goodwill of family members like Gabrielle's older sister to support the children with their home language texts. By seeking advice from other sources of help I was able to monitor the children's progress more effectively. As an example, I asked a local student studying GCSE Swahili to read Aliya's story and give me his impression of it. His observations, combined with Aliya's aunt's suggestions, made me realise just how confident and literate Aliya was in her home language, a quality hidden from the rest of the school until now.

As well as working collaboratively, activating prior knowledge and harnessing the children's considerable linguistic skills, the bilingual books project demonstrated other aspects of good EAL practice. An important means of scaffolding the students' language learning was to embed the stories in recognisable contexts. Familiarity with the story avoided the language requirements becoming too abstract and therefore too complex or demanding. By choosing a known story or topic, the students were able to use their strongest languages (in some cases English, in others home language) to write a first draft of the text and then use this as the basis for translation into their second language.

The children had many different opportunities to talk about and share their work. Discussing and rehearsing their ideas were important strategies. Having planned their stories in a series of pictures, the children talked through their ideas, developing a conversational dialogue with a partner who acted as their audience and offered comments and immediate feedback. Gradually, over several weeks, their talk became more presentational and representative of written prose as they practised and refined their ideas in front of the whole group. I regarded my role as a guide,

leading the children from one type of talk to another in a pedagogic style that Gibbons (2002) calls Teacher Guided Reporting. Using questioning and feedback, I encouraged the children's talk to move from a literal, conversational style to a more formal expression of ideas.

## Concluding thoughts

*I feel more confident with the different languages that I speak and yes, my home language is important to me. The work has made me feel like I can write any Swahili word.*

Aliya, Year 5.

There are many advantages to being bilingual. Greater meta-linguistic awareness and knowledge of one language can influence the acquisition of another and vice versa. Thinking in and manipulating two or more languages provides bilingual speakers with a broader range of cognitive and academic resources to draw on than monolingual learners.

Children often acquire EAL in school while maintaining their home languages through interaction with family members, through religious practices and via community schooling. When these two separate worlds combine, forming connections between home language learning and EAL, pupils transfer skills from one language to another in a way that enhances the acquisition of both languages. The bilingual books project created a small window into this way of working. If schools, in their quest for higher standards in English literacy, recognise literacy and oracy skills in any language as partners in the development of EAL, then using those skills within mainstream teaching and learning will engage bilingual pupils in a more meaningful and inclusive curriculum.

The bilingual books project allowed children at different stages of learning English, and with varying levels of literacy in their home languages, to 'syncretise' or combine these skills to produce books of quality that they felt justifiably proud of. This outcome focused the children's attention on specific skills but also inspired them to use their full language repertoires.

It also allowed the children to be independent workers who demonstrated identities and talents that would normally remain hidden beneath a drive for attainment in and through English. School-based literacy practices that legitimise English as the dominant language were momentarily replaced by other literacies of equal value.

Finally, this validation of children's language increased their sense of inclusion and self-worth. It gave them opportunities to excel in ways that were normally unavailable to them. Presentation of the books during a special, whole-school assembly publicly raised the profile of the children's work. It resulted in a disaffected, English-speaking pupil leafing through Casmir's book saying, 'Isn't this great Miss', as he grinned at Casmir with genuine respect. Best of all, it led to other EAL learners asking when they could write their bilingual stories.

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**Justine Dakin** is an experienced primary teacher whose career began with a class of 34 children aged 5–6, most of whom spoke EAL. With little training on the subject at university, she quickly learned the value of visual clues as a scaffold for learning and communication. After the birth of her own children she worked part time, specialising in EAL support and became responsible for monitoring the progress of young bilingual pupils involved in a city-wide intervention project to raise attainment in literacy. This taught her the skills of how to listen to children talk, differentiate work for EAL learners and how to assess language acquisition in detail. She now works as a local authority advisory teacher, supporting staff and pupils in schools, as well as training colleagues in all aspects of EAL pedagogy and practice. She is currently finishing an EdD in Applied Linguistics and Teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) at Bristol University.

# Developing vocabulary in a multilingual classroom



# 2

## Developing vocabulary in a multilingual classroom

Latika Davis

### Introduction

In this chapter I will describe how the key messages about vocabulary development were incorporated into practice in a primary classroom of 7- to 8-year olds. The pupils were from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds including English, Urdu, Turkish and Amharic. The monolingual class teacher was experienced in teaching bilingual learners but did not consider herself an expert in English as an additional language (EAL). A teaching assistant who spoke Urdu supported group work for two mornings each week. All the EAL learners except one were beyond the initial stages of acquiring English as an additional language, that is, they were fluent for their age in everyday face-to-face conversational contexts but needed continued support in order to develop the cognitive and academic language required for academic success.

In 2003, schools in England embarked on a national drive to improve the teaching and learning of English and mathematics through the National Strategies – a national initiative to raise standards achieved by learners aged 5–16 years. A key focus was to improve teacher knowledge and understanding of how children learn the specific skills of reading, writing and mathematics. It included focused attention on teaching children for whom English is an additional language. A wide range of primary school practitioners, some with specialist expertise in EAL but most with some experience of teaching bilingual learners, came together to share and develop effective practice for raising the educational standards achieved by bilingual learners.

The work was incorporated into the publication of *Excellence and Enjoyment: learning and teaching for bilingual children in the primary years* (2006) which provided comprehensive practitioner guidance on developing language and literacy as well as ensuring access to the curriculum.

Professional development and classroom practice drew on:

- EAL pedagogy and practice
- research into writing by EAL learners by Cameron and Besser (2004)
- McWilliam's (1998) work on vocabulary development in multilingual classrooms.

## What does it mean to ‘know’ vocabulary?

A child’s receptive vocabulary is typically larger than his or her productive vocabulary, and learners of English as a second, additional or foreign language usually develop a receptive understanding of new words before they are able to produce them.

*Knowing a word involves a lot more than being able to recognise what it sounds like or looks like. It is more than being able to provide a dictionary definition. It also means being able to use it appropriately and effectively in a range of contexts. Developing an understanding of a word is a process that occurs over time and involves numerous encounters with the word in various contexts.*

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2006

‘Knowing’ a word is a matter of degree ranging from a general sense of the meaning of the word to knowing it within a specific context, to understand the word and be able to recall it to use in appropriate situations, to having a rich, decontextualised knowledge of a word’s meaning, its relationship to other words, and its extension to metaphorical use.

‘Knowing’ a word means knowing:

- the multiple meanings of
  - everyday words such as *table* (a chart with information, a surface, multiplication sequence), *line*
  - words which have different meanings when used in different contexts: *this is an unexploded shell; I found this lovely shell on the beach; shell the peas for me, please*
  - words which have a literal and a figurative meaning: *The tortoise stayed inside his shell; that girl has started to come out of her shell lately*
  - words which acquire different meanings when used with different prepositions: *turn over; turn under; turn up; turn down.*
- how words combine with other words to make new words, for example shellfish
- about word order of set phrases which sound unnatural or wrong in a different order (called collocation), for example *fish and chips* rather than *chips and fish*
- about word combinations where substitutions sound wrong or unnatural for example a *quick shower* not a *fast shower*
- about words and phrases which have negative connotations compared to the neutral alternative or imply a point of view: *brat* rather than *child*, *banger* rather than *car*
- how they can belong to different word classes depending on the function they are performing in a particular sentence.

Multiple meanings, collocation, synonymy and antonymy are features of behaviour of vocabulary in all languages so prior knowledge of these features in the learner’s first language supports learning about these features in English.

## Teaching vocabulary

English as an additional language (EAL) learners learn considerable vocabulary in English through social interactions with peers in the classroom as well as the playground, social interactions with a range of adults such as lunch-time supervisors and librarians; exposure to English outside the classroom through access to multi-media such as television and radio; as well as exposure to print in the environment outside the school through magazines, newspapers, leaflets as well street signs and billboards.

However, they often tend to stay within a narrow range of familiar vocabulary. They require planned intervention to move out of their ‘comfort’ zone to use of new vocabulary. They may also mask gaps or compensate for insecurity in vocabulary by pointing; saying *this, it, that*; using words like *thing, bit, stuff* (*used a thing to dig with* instead of *spade*); using known category nouns such as *shape* rather than precise words such as *octagon*; and most importantly, avoid taking risks with new words by staying within the parameters of the vocabulary they are familiar with.

The practitioners in this class were keen to address confidence in risk taking and developing academic language proficiency through explicit teaching and opportunities to practise new language. They were mindful that the bilingual learners in the class may be like the pupil quoted by Gibbons (2002) from the *Bilingual Interface Project Report 1997*:

*I can say what I want, but not for school work and strangers*

For school work, the children needed to develop academic language which is characterised by the use of the passive voice, ideas and concepts as agents, vocabulary with Greek or Latin roots, use of metaphor and personification and nominalisations. They also needed to develop cognitive and abstract language for purposes such as classifying, analysing, hypothesising and generalising.

They needed to be taught vocabulary of four broad types:

- synonyms for words they already knew
- the multiple meanings, subtleties and connotations of words they already knew at some level including figurative and idiomatic meanings
- literary metaphor and imagery
- academic vocabulary, that is, words for new concepts, particularly subject-specific vocabulary and abstract ideas.

Practitioners found this teaching sequence, drawing on the 2006 DfES guidance, a useful way to provide the frequent encounters with new vocabulary:

- plan explicitly for teaching it
- model it in context
- prompt for it and elicit it
- repeat it
- draw attention to it and use it in other contexts
- display it in a supportive way

- provide opportunities to practise it
- give focused positive feedback about its use
- encourage learners to reflect on the way they use it.

Lesson plans identified vocabulary for teaching by identifying the key words (or target words) to be taught, and extended the learning beyond defining and explaining them. They drew on McWilliams' (1998) work on 'rich scripting' which includes exploring the word meaning in the topic or subject area and seeing how words and phrases change their meaning according to how they are used.

Dedicated time was allocated for focused vocabulary work in addition to vocabulary teaching within overall lesson plans. The children were introduced to at least 15 new words each week, and often more.

Meanings of target words were explored through discussion scaffolded with artefacts, illustrations and use of first language. The use of the target words was modelled and reinforced through regular prompting, which provided repeated opportunities for hearing and using the words in a meaningful context. The print environment provided examples of use of the target vocabulary. Ongoing assessment was used to provide feedback on the use of the target words and once a week, progress was reviewed as a whole-class activity. The teacher and the teaching assistant used remodelling and recasting effectively to extend the use of general and technical vocabulary.

**Child:** *My uncle will mend the front door tomorrow.*

**Adult:** *That's good. Will you help your uncle repair the door?*

**Child:** *We are weighing different things.*

**Adult:** *Yes, we are learning about weight.*

## Planning for vocabulary teaching

A key question considered by practitioners was which words to select for explicit teaching. These should be important for understanding the text or the context, and functionally important words that pupils will encounter often. The work of Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002) on vocabulary instruction was useful in planning for vocabulary teaching. They identify three tiers for words.

**Tier one** words are frequently occurring words which children would meet in a range of contexts and thus were likely to know well, for example *baby, happy, house, car*.

**Tier two** words appear in texts frequently and so children would have some understanding of these words, for example *fortunate, amusing, coincidence*.

**Tier three** words tend to be curricular topic specific, for example *portcullis, irrigation, chrysalis*. They are words which are required to access the curriculum. Tier three words are less recyclable than tier two words and thus have less impact on proficiency in English.

Consider this sentence: *The table below shows how many people travel by bus at different times of the day.*

Here we can say that *bus*, *day* and *below* are tier one words (understanding of *below* in this context may need to be checked), *table* and *times* have mathematical as well as other meanings and so are tier two words.

McWilliams' rich scripting approach to planning provides a way to explore the meanings of words at different levels. A *table* can be a set of numbers or an item of furniture; it also forms part of a number of compound words such as *tablecloth*, *table tennis*, *table top*, *top table* as well as idiomatic phrases like *at the head of the table*.

An audit of teaching plans in this class showed that there was explicit planning for tier three words across the curriculum but planning for tier two words was patchy. So the revised teaching plans focused on:

- probing for understanding of tier one words to ensure students were secure in their understanding and use
- systematic teaching of at least 15 new tier two words each week, including words with similar meanings, words with opposite meanings, words with multiple meanings, compound words and metaphors
- teaching or explaining tier three words for topics across the curriculum.

The key strategies for teaching vocabulary were:

- shared and guided reading with follow up activities for exploring literal meanings as well as connotation and figurative language
- use of graphic organisers for exploring synonyms, antonyms and technical or subject specific vocabulary
- activities to explore collocations.

## Exploring meaning during shared and guided reading and writing

A rich reading repertoire drawing on the range of genres, which engages and challenges children, is essential for exposure to rich language in general and rich vocabulary in particular. Teacher-led shared reading sessions provide access to literature which children may not yet read fluently by themselves and language which they do not yet use in their academic work.

The planning for shared reading by the class teacher and the teaching assistant identified key vocabulary which needed to be pre-taught to support meaning making and vocabulary which would be explored further during the shared reading.

During shared reading, the teacher modelled strategies for identifying and using contextual clues in the text as well as illustrations for working out the meanings of unfamiliar words. In one class the following text was used:

*When the cat pounced on the dog, the dog yelped. As he jumped up in shock, he knocked over a lamp which crashed to the floor. The animals ran past Stella, tripping her. She fell to the floor and began sobbing. Her brother Felix yelled at the animals to stop. As the noise and confusion mounted, Mum hollered upstairs, 'What's all that commotion?'*

The teacher talked the children through the process of working out the meaning of commotion.

*There are many clues in the text to help us work out what commotion means. Words such as **sobbing**, **crashed** and **yelling** means there is a lot of noise. Words such as **jumped**, **knocked over** and **fell** show that there are lots of things happening at the same time. The last sentence sums it up with 'as the noise and confusion mounted'. This is the author's clue about what **commotion** means – a scene of noise and confusion.*

During shared reading attention is drawn to words and phrases which have more than one meaning, collocations, idiomatic phrases, figurative language and connotations of words. Children are asked what they understand by the words or phrases within the given context. This supports comprehension, and provides starter words and phrases for follow-up focused vocabulary work. Exploring meaning of abstract nouns within the context of topic-related cross-curricular texts is particularly useful.

Shared reading sessions are also used to model the use of dictionaries and demonstrate the process of thinking through and deciding which definition is the most likely within the context of the text.

Shared reading also provides an opportunity to check for understanding of words children are expected to know. A recap of the seasons with the question: 'can we name our seasons?' led to everyone contributing *autumn, winter and so on*, except for one Malay pupil who had joined the class in the last six months whose contribution was *mango season, durian season, monsoon season*. It provided an excellent opportunity for the teacher to explore how seasons are described differently in different countries and the possible reasons for this. It led to a lively multilingual discussion in which children who had visited their parents' country of origin were able to share their knowledge of how seasons were described.

When exploring similes and metaphors within the context of the text, children can be asked to create an image of the metaphor in their mind. They then explain the image in words or through drawings to a partner. A few explanations can be shared with the whole class to discuss and develop a shared understanding of the metaphor as well as the writer's reasons for choosing it.

Guided reading sessions are also used to reinforce and practise these skills and follow up independent work providing opportunities to use the new vocabulary. This scaffolded approach means that when the new vocabulary is used in sentences, it is more likely to be used appropriately.

Two strategies which are very successful in developing appropriate and accurate use of new vocabulary are cloze procedure and text substitution during shared and guided writing. These generate a dialogue for making word choices for particular contexts and for particular effects, encouraging risk-taking in drawing on the children's own vocabularies in first as well as additional language, and nurturing an enthusiasm for words. Pupils' individual vocabularies offer a rich resource for

classroom activities, since many of the less common words used by individual pupils may not be known or used by others (Cameron and Besser 2004).

In this example the teacher leads a discussion of the following passage:

*They arrived at the house which would be their home now. Dad struggled up the path with the suitcases and muttered to himself about the two bangers parked in the drive next door and the two brats playing with a dirty football.*

**Teacher:** *How does dad feel about their new home?*

**Child A:** *He's not happy or excited because the bags are heavy.*

**Child B:** *He's not talking to anyone, just himself because he is not happy.*

**Teacher:** *Yes, he's muttering about bangers and brats. Why does the writer use those words?*

**Child C:** *Bangers are old cars which been bashed up.*

**Teacher:** *Yes, they are old, beaten up and haven't been looked after very well. Why do you think the author calls them bangers and not cars?*

**Child B:** *Cars might be nice but bangers are not nice.*

**Teacher:** *That's right, dad thinking of them as bangers means he does not like them. Who's playing with the football?*

**Child A :** *Two boys.*

**Child C:** *Or a boy and a girl.*

**Teacher:** *So brats are two children. Why does dad think of them as brats?*

**Child A :** *My grandad calls the next door children brats when they are naughty.*

**Teacher:** *And here dad thinks the children are going to be naughty and rude, even though they are just playing. So there are many clues which tell us that dad is not happy about their new home.*

**Child B:** *He does not like the bangers and he thinks the children will be naughty.*

**Teacher:** *Yes, the author uses words such as muttering, bangers and brats to show dad is not pleased about coming to live here. Tomorrow, we will replace them with words that show that dad is very pleased to be at his new house.*

## Use of graphic organisers

Graphic organisers, such as the word trees described above, are a useful tool for developing vocabulary across the curriculum. They provide a visual display of words and links between them which can be drawn on to support independent work: *continuums and spectrums* can be used to sequence and prioritise; *grids* can be used for opposites and to compare and contrast; *tree diagrams* can be used to classify and organise words into a schema which supports understanding; *semantic webs* can be used to group and organise words related to a theme.

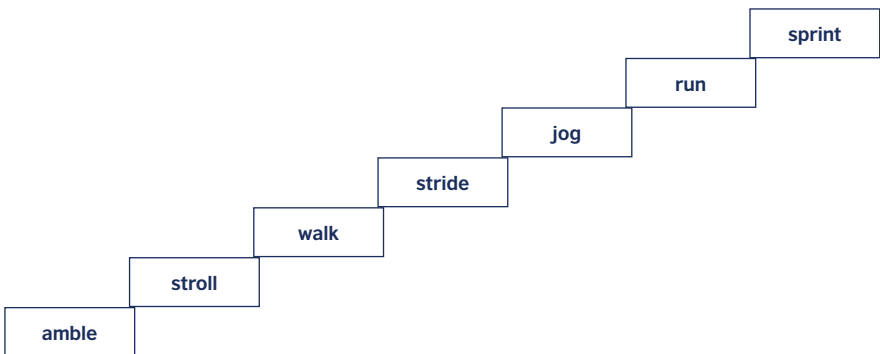
### Grid for opposites when describing light

A small group worked on developing descriptive vocabulary as part of a cross-curricular *topic day and night* focusing on the different ways of describing the light in a series of photographs of day and night scenes. They were provided with a set of words which they matched to the photographs and then arranged them in a grid. Blank cards were provided to add more words. The task enabled children to draw on their vocabularies in first language too. The display version below was made later by two pupils working on their IT skills.



### Continuum for synonyms

For work on the class topic of transport, to add further precision, clarity and variety in the use of language, this cline was used to explore the gradations of meaning for the notion of pace in the movement of the pedestrians on the street. Children worked in pairs with whiteboards to list words which described different ways in which a person would move between two places. Their ideas were harvested to develop a class cline.





It is important for the print environment to provide examples of use of the vocabulary being taught and for teachers to encourage the use of the models. The example demonstrates the differences in meaning for the words in a cline.

Jason likes to **stroll** along the lane.

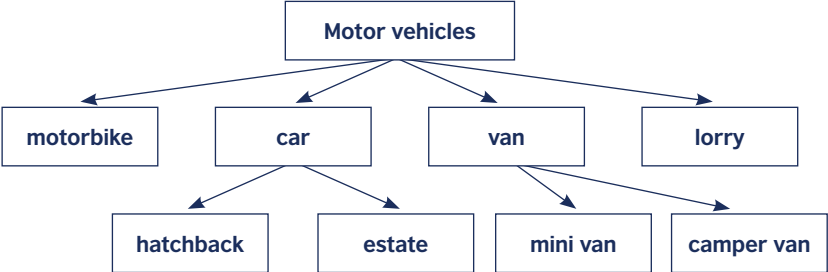
Meena usually overtakes Jason because she likes to **jog** along the lane.

Simeon and Sobia reached the teashop at the end of the lane first because they like to **sprint**.

Alponse **ran** along the lane while Karen **jogged** behind him.

**Tree diagrams**

This tree diagram supported the development of precision in the use of language, and encouraged the use of specific words (hyponyms) such as *van*, *sports car*, which exemplify a general term (a superordinate) such as *motor vehicles*. Grouping words supported the children in remembering and making sense of the words. This whole class activity was supported with unambiguous photographs and illustrations. A follow up independent collaborative activity in threes provided an opportunity to reinforce understanding and add to the collection of specific words.



A large display of this diagram was created on the parents' noticeboard for the class and proved very popular, with fathers competing to provide pictures and names of different lorries and vans. By the end of the term, all the children could name, spell and use the label *pantehnicon*<sup>2</sup> in their writing.

**Semantic webs**

Semantic webs are used frequently for linking and organising ideas for a topic or a theme. When used for exploring vocabulary linked to particular topics or themes, they provide a useful schema to improve understanding and use of the new words. Use of colour enables children to note how words change depending on use. Shared discussion, miming and acting out words supported meaning making and nurtured an enthusiasm for the new words and their use.

<sup>2</sup> Children understood that while originally the word meant a horse-drawn furniture removal van, it is now referred to a very large van used when people move house with all their belongings.

## Word weaving

A favourite activity in the class – undertaken as a whole class or by groups was word-weaving. Norah McWilliams (1998) describes word weaving as a metaphor based on the concrete reality of weaving words from semantic investigations and written on card into a word weaving loom frame. To start with, the loom frames were made of cards but eventually the school caretaker made a wooden frame with vertical strings through which word strips of card could be woven through. Children had a word weaving card with one word from the curriculum topic, and they had to find words with similar meanings or opposite meanings or phrases with the word in them. Words in the languages of the classroom were written in the home language script by family members as well as the teaching assistant. Once these words were woven into the loom, children had to explain their meanings and demonstrate their use in sentences. This provided opportunity to practise the words and also enabled the teachers to assess that words were used appropriately and accurately.

The activity enabled all learners, but EAL learners in particular, to actively ‘engage in semantic exploration in and out of different contexts of curriculum, in and out of literal, figurative, connotative meanings, in and out of different languages and the different cultural milieux of home and school.’ (McWilliams 1998)

### Word weaving example showing words with multiple meanings

sign	addition sign	sign a letter	traffic sign	plus sign	sign language
difference	difference between seven and nine	differences between cats and dogs	differences between the two pictures	split the difference	makes no difference

*‘...the ‘word’ is a shared territory; ‘meaning’ is an individually negotiated understanding.’ (Halliday 1975)*

## Concluding thoughts

Improving practitioner knowledge and understanding of how to support bilingual learners to develop vocabulary in English is crucial if migrant children are to be successful in acquiring language and literacy and access the school curriculum delivered in English.

The teacher and the teaching assistant in the class I have used as an example drew on knowledge and understanding of additional language acquisition to plan explicitly for vocabulary development. The range of teaching and learning activities used provided an opportunity for children to talk about new words, explore their meanings through discussion and develop confidence in using the words in their school work and when talking with strangers. Regular review of teaching enabled the teaching team to reflect on what worked and what needed to be improved. They were surprised at the number of times words needed to be revisited before they became part of children’s repertoire. They were pleased at the enthusiasm for learning new words which had been generated by focused vocabulary development sessions but realised that unless they planned to revisit the collections of words and phrases displayed in the print environment, and remembered to draw attention to the words during shared writing as well as mathematics and other subject lessons, children did not remember to use them.

The classroom ethos supported and celebrated an interest in words, phrases and sentences – it provided the environment in which language and curricular learning flourished. Eight-year-old Suman summed it up when he said ‘*my favourite word on our word tree is delicious – you can taste the food when you use it to describe your dinner*’.

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# Valuing home languages

# 3

## Valuing home languages

Clare Wardman, Judith Bell and Emma Sharp

### Introduction

*Ten-year-old Sifat walks out of classroom talking animatedly in Pashto to a younger child, and his teacher smiles to herself. She is so thrilled to hear the children using their home language with one another because she knows that it's only now they feel happy to. She vividly remembers last year when Samsor and Turan, now in the year above, looked horrified at the idea of identifying themselves as Pashto speakers let alone wanting to speak it. Now there are even non-Pashto speakers who want to join the school's Pashto club. The teacher reflects on the changes to her own teaching practice that have led to this, and vows to fight to maximise the use of home languages, now she knows how much a minority language's image and profile can rise, enhancing the children's own identities alongside it.*

Statistics from the 2011 School Census indicate that one in six English primary school pupils do not speak English as their first language, a figure that has increased by over 100 per cent since the late 1990s. Many local authorities, especially those in the urban centres most associated with immigration, London, Birmingham and Bradford, have many years' experience in working with English language learners. Schools in areas with a large, well-established English as an additional language (EAL) population, especially one drawn from communities with the same or similar home languages, have tended over time to find appropriate ways to facilitate using home languages in school, but schools newer to EAL issues (or with a much smaller or more diverse population) tend not to do so to the same extent.

This paper will follow the journey taken by Emma and Judith (primary school teachers and co-authors of this paper) in north-west England over 18 months. When discussing home languages at the start of this journey, Judith said that children have *'to learn to use [their home language] appropriately, so in our school at the moment there isn't a culture of [children] being allowed to use it without there being a bilingual member of staff there to sort of oversee it'*. Although she did encourage the children to use their home languages if they were struggling to express themselves in English, she was aware that in between the Early Years and Year 5/6, they were barely heard. A year later, she was 'committed' to working on developing multilingual strategies in class, setting particular tasks up as 'language-buddy' activities.

In this chapter, we will first discuss some of the barriers faced by many primary school teachers to encouraging home language use. We will then report on new innovations in one school in north-west England, which have been implemented as

a direct result of postgraduate level training provided by the local authority, and discuss the impact of these new practices.

## Monolingual habitus

The particular history of education in the UK and the focus on English-only examinations and league tables has contributed to, and indeed ingrained, a transition model of bilingual education<sup>3</sup>, in which the ‘common-sense’ view amongst non-specialists, is that the *‘quicker we get children speaking English the better’*. Ideologically, English is seen as the language of the nation, and it is well known that it has traditionally been a nation with a monolingual viewpoint, which is rare on a global level, as most people in the world are at least bilingual. This monolingual *habitus*, coupled with the fact that children tend to appear fluent within a few months causes inexperienced teachers to think that an investment in home languages is unnecessary, except to show simple cultural acceptance. However, this seeming fluency in many, if not most, cases disguises a lack of a more academic or conceptual language development in children.

Research has demonstrated how important maintenance and development of the home language is for growth in additional languages. This is a message that is now beginning to reach schools that hitherto would have ascribed to the above ‘common-sense’ perspective. Although some school head teachers feel powerless to prevent attrition of home languages, many more are now worried about it and see it happening to the children in their schools. One of the teachers in this study points out that *‘it is clear that subtractive bilingualism [is] rife in the school’*.

Schools new to EAL, which may not have a strong local authority specialist provision, or those still developing strategies due to an increase in the population of children requiring additional resources, have usually found themselves focusing heavily and solely on the transition to English. So, what are the key impediments to using home languages that monolingual teachers report?

## Barriers to home language use in primary schools

There are many reasons why home languages are sometimes unused in UK primary schools. It is highly likely that, for some teachers, it has not been considered as an option, or a priority. Others may hold ideological views opposing such practice. For the majority of teachers, however, the three key factors appear to be: fear; lack of resources; and lack of knowledge.

### Fear

*Miss, Miss, he’s talking about maths!*

One of the frequently expressed worries of teachers in allowing children to talk in their home language in the classroom is that the pupils may be off-task. However, this is rarely the problem that practitioners think it may be:

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<sup>3</sup> See Colin Baker’s work for more on the various models of bilingual education, as well as a thorough review of research in bilingualism and bilingual education: Baker, C. (2011). *Principles of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. 5th ed. Multilingual Matters: Bristol.

*'Aren't you worried what they're talking about?' is one of the questions I am always asked as a monolingual teacher when my class are working in 'language-buddy' groups. Well...here I was in a literacy lesson and someone had 'snitched' on the boys for talking about maths! As in any classroom situation where children are working in groups you can usually tell when children are off task and certainly in my experience in primary school someone always 'tells'.*

There can also be a fear of the reaction from the children. As Emma and Judith both point out, children can start to feel embarrassment about using their home language as they grow older. This is likely to be compounded by the school and society ethos of transition to English, causing children to see English as the language of school and their home language as only appropriate for the home. One of the children in Judith's class focused on this in his final feedback, indicating how important it was to him:

*I felt a bit embarrassed speaking in my home language. You must understand when your always speaking in English it is a bit embarrassing at first later on you fell more confident to speak in your own language.*

Some teachers worry that spotlighting home languages draws attention to EAL children, perhaps increasing any stigma for those children. This can lead to a more piecemeal approach to home language use, perhaps in the form of a 'Polish' week, or book week readings in a variety of languages, which, although potentially beneficial from a cultural awareness point of view, can take teachers away from more sustained and everyday multilingual classroom strategies.

Fear over the reactions of parents of EAL children, who sometimes hold the view that the transition model is right for their children and will give them the best start and future chances in life, can lead teachers to avoid home language use at school, and to discourage (or at least not particularly encourage) them at home. Both Emma and Judith talk about how hard it can be to persuade parents that they should speak their first languages at home instead of English. Judith reflects:

*It is interesting to see that often (but not always) the children who are the most fluent and developed in terms of vocabulary and complex structures in English often have mothers with little English which ensures the continuation of their first language ... the language progress of some children can be severely impaired if their parents speak to them in their broken English rather than their more developed first language.*

It is not just the expectations of parents of EAL children that teachers and school management need to meet, the reactions of parents of English-as-a-first language children are also relevant for many. Some teachers fear that allowing EAL children to use their home languages in the school may be perceived as exclusion of English-speaking children.

## Resources

Lack of money for materials such as dual language books and technologies that can help with working in multiple languages is likely to be one of the first reasons given for not encouraging home language use. Teachers tend to be left to produce home

language artefacts for new arrivals as they arrive, by trawling the internet for useful terms and creating their own survival kits. A more coherent and centrally-driven source of materials, that could take children from survival to being able to fully access the curriculum through a variety of languages, would ease the burden.

It is obvious that working with home languages is significantly easier if there are bilingual staff within the school. However, bilingual staff are rare, especially those with Qualified Teacher status. The issue of the lack of recruits into British initial teacher education programmes from bilingual or plurilingual graduates has been flagged up by school inspectors and it is hoped that, with the new generations of children and grandchildren of migrants, there will start to be a larger pool of potential bilingual primary school teachers.

However, it is not vital that bilingual teaching staff are present for multilingual work to be successful and beneficial. There has been a loss of specialist EAL teams that have historically been able to offer guidance, support and knowledge to schools. This means that schools now have fewer specialists to call on when they have new arrivals and a longer wait, less capacity, and perhaps higher costs if any of their pupils need longer term support. The upshot of this is that existing class teachers need to be equipped with the training to deal with the final barrier: that of a lack of knowledge about second language learning and bilingual strategies.

### **Knowledge**

Many teachers do not feel that they know how to embed home languages in classroom practice in ways that are meaningful and linguistically and academically worthwhile, without being able to speak a little of the children's language. Although teachers often try to learn snippets of the children's languages, it is generally recognised that it is an impractical approach in the diverse setting of the UK. Without training in particular strategies for multilingual learning, some schools appear to use home languages in a more tokenistic manner, in order to fulfil a sense of duty to accept and demonstrate cultural awareness. This is especially true for schools with very low populations of EAL children.

Emma and Judith's school is not one of those schools. Just under three-quarters of the school's population of 436 children speaks EAL. Therefore, it would probably be surprising if home languages were not in evidence throughout the school. However, as Emma says,

*although our school had a long history of dual language delivery in Foundation and Early Years through story-telling and translation of tasks and concepts somewhere along the line children were dropping their home language in favour of English which in turn was creating a dip in their attainment.*

How to actually maintain the home language in school is quite another thing from bilingual story-telling in the nursery. Judith comments:

*Whilst I 'knew' that first language should be encouraged and used, especially in subjects such as science, where children may not have the vocabulary in English to explain phenomena, my previous attempts where I would say 'you can use your*



*home language if you want to' had not been successful except when they were led by a Bilingual Language Assistant.*

Therefore, it is important that adequate and regular training on second language acquisition, EAL needs, and bilingual strategies is provided for all staff. This will allow teachers and support staff to gain an understanding of the key differences between first and second language acquisition and to be aware of some of the potential difficulties that children with certain home languages will face with English. Training also equips teaching staff with skills, strategies and tasks to get the best out of their pupils and refreshes their knowledge on research into a range of areas, including language and identity, language and culture, and the key role of the first language in academic success, as well as linguistic, social and cultural growth.

## **Knocking down the barriers**

So we have the scene set for our two teachers, Emma and Judith. They work in a big primary school, with a large population of children with home languages, which were not English. The Foundation and Early Years provision was highly bilingual, with English and Urdu/Punjabi being used in story-telling and general classroom work, although the remaining eight other languages of the school children (Bengali, Cantonese, French, German, Gujarati, Pashto, Polish and Sotho) were not in use. Both teachers had observed and commented that home language use often peters out as children grow older. Although Judith did talk about working with her bilingual learning assistant in science and mathematics classes before the multilingual project began, home languages were generally used to support those children who were struggling to express themselves. As far as resources are concerned, the school owned some dual language books but not a large stock and it was generally felt that, as Judith put it, using bilingual books is *'flagging it up that it's OK, this is OK and we accept everyone's languages in school and value them'*. Judith had taken on the EAL co-ordinator role in 2010 and was actively looking for ways to improve the situation for the children in the school.

This section will discuss the key aspects of this innovative new project at St Luke's, starting with the training that both Emma and Judith undertook, and turning to what they implemented in the school as a result of this training, the 'language-buddies' scheme and the Pashto club, before considering the effects of these two schemes on the children, the parents, and the school environment as a whole.

## **Training**

Emma and Judith are lucky enough to be working in a highly pro-active and research-led local authority, under a Curriculum and Language Access Service that receives nothing but the highest praise from teachers and support staff in the area. They have focused on providing training at appropriate levels for all staff working with EAL children, from in service training (INSET) for all staff, to masters level courses for those working more closely or at a higher level with EAL needs. Judith says of the training she received:

*Attending the Meeting The Needs of EAL Learner sessions led by our local authority Education Maintenance Allowance service and studying to write assignments for the MA modules made me think even more about the need to promote/value and encourage the use of first language in the class room and also at home for our Key Stage 2 children.*

For Emma, particular assignments on the MA have caused her to feel that her knowledge as a practitioner has widened to include a deeper insight into schooling not only of pupils who are new arrivals from abroad but also their parents. She says,

*I see far more deeply the issues subtractive bilingualism has upon second and third generation Pashto speakers and the importance of oracy and fostering continued first language use.*

## **Language-buddies**

As a result of their training experiences, Judith and her year group partner decided to set up a system of 'language-buddies', where children were grouped according to home language. However, this grouping was not a particular straightforward process and was an eye-opener for both, as Emma's experience in the classroom relates:

*Our first homework assignment was to 'identify the children's home languages in your class.' That didn't seem too hard; a few searches on Integris, the school's data system, should solve that. I mentioned the homework to my bilingual assistant and he smiled knowingly and suggested I ask the children themselves as well.*

*So I began: 'I will be coming around to ask you about the language you speak at home, maybe your mum talks to you in this language or your dad or both... Now, Umar how about you?'*

*'Urdu, Miss.'*

*I asked nearly all the Pakistani heritage children and they all announced they were Urdu speakers. This baffled me a little as the data held on our system didn't acknowledge this. I glanced at the bilingual assistant and said, 'Mr Abidi, quite a few children are recorded as Punjabi speakers, but the children are saying they are Urdu speakers.... What do you think?'*

*'You know children, it's important to tell Miss what you have always talked in your house and not be ashamed.'*

*He turned to Jafar, a tall lad who hero-worshipped Umar.*

*'Jafar, come on now, what does your mum speak at home to you?'*

*Jafar looked rather peeved and embarrassed to admit he was a Punjabi speaker as did a large majority of the rest of the class. I praised them for knowing some Urdu, and being excellent at Punjabi.*

*This was the first step in a) unearthing the local community's image of Urdu as a superior language and b) developing the children's identities as bilinguals who could use their first language in school.*

Even after the children had all been able to identify themselves as speakers of their home languages, it was not always plain sailing. Practically speaking, 'language-buddy'

classes demand that particular children need to move around and this can cause difficulties in some classes with particular group dynamics; this affected Judith's class more than Emma's during the early stages of this project. Bringing parents into Year 5 and 6 classes can also raise embarrassment levels amongst children, and some children's feedback confirms this.

'Language-buddy' classes, however, can be led on a huge range of topics and Aalia recalls the variety of subjects they covered bilingually with language buddies and parents:

*When we started doing language buddies we felt very worried but then we got used to it. My mum came in for bread tasting and bread making. We did a lot of work together. We wrote in English and Urdu for literacy. When we did maths in languages buddies we couldn't say any words in Urdu. We did a poster about hygiene and safety in the kitchen. We wrote it in Urdu. We saw a clip of hygiene and safety in the kitchen. We enjoyed drawing and colouring our Urdu posters after making our bread.*

## **Pashto club**

Emma's own project was the formation of Community Language Classes in the Pashto community, intended to work with families and children bilingually. Although there are 30 Pashto speakers in the school census figures for 2011, up from 21 in 2007, when asked to group themselves into home languages, most Pashto-speakers refused to do so. Emma was struck and saddened by the lack of identification and acknowledgement of this language and culture and quickly learned that this community has felt isolated and discriminated against. She recalls how she got it going.

*I set small achievable realistic home language targets by developing a secret language club, where using home language in single words, phrases and then group work earned the children certificates.*

A key aspect of this project is working with bilingual support, in the shape of family members, most notably 'Auntie Sanga', a larger-than-life character who comes to all the sessions and works with Emma. Finding resources was initially difficult; Emma found only one book available to purchase for teaching Pashto using English. And literacy in Pashto amongst the bilingual parents working as teachers has also been an issue, as Auntie Sanga could not read all of the texts, and sometimes needs help from the children, if possible. If no one understands a text, it has to be missed out.

## **Children's reactions: in class and club, in feedback**

Emma felt strongly that these new multilingual strategies were offering much to the children in their care. She felt that:

*Meeting the needs of EAL learners was no longer restricted to the timetabled slot of bilingual assistance support once or twice a week, isolated and a shot in the dark. It was in everything we did.*

In feedback, all the children said they felt that they had improved in both their home language and English through working multilingually, and this was corroborated by

Emma's figures on the early success of the Pashto club, in which progress in speaking and reading in both languages was recorded during the seven-week programme.

Another key success indicator was the level of peer support being undertaken. In the Pashto club, there were numerous examples of older children helping and scaffolding younger ones, and in language buddy classes, children reported enjoying working with, and learning from, children with both the same and different home languages, as we can see here from Nadia and Kerry's feedback:

*I like my languages buddies because I can learn Nadia's language that is Sinhalese. Nadia speaks Sri Lanka in her home and with her mum and sister. They understand a lot of Sinhalese and don't speak a lot of it.*

*I like my languages buddies because I can learn Kerry's language, which is Cantonese. Kerry speaks Cantonese in her home with her dad, sisters and grandma. They understand a lot of and don't Cantonese speak a lot of it.*

## Working with parents

Another key aspect of the language buddy system and the community language class is to try to get over to parents that they should use home languages at home, especially if their English is not strong. And that this will, in fact, improve their English. Emma felt that one of the strongest success indicators of the Pashto club was actually the effect on the children of seeing a family member speaking the home language outside of the home, thereby legitimising it in the eyes of the children.

## The school at large

Innovative practice in Year 5 within one primary school is all very well and good, but Judith, as EAL co-ordinator for the school, is, of course, not planning to let it stop there.

She has ensured that she and Emma have discussed their experiences in staff meetings. She has offered support and encouragement to other staff, and although progress is currently slow, other teachers in the school say they are starting to dabble in language buddy work.

The monolingual teaching assistant's experience, working alongside Judith also showed a slow-burn but an overall positive viewpoint:

*At first I found the idea of language buddies a bit odd. However having participated I found it to be worthwhile and enjoyed working with children and parents and picked up a few words in Punjabi. If we encourage the use of home language I believe that children feel more valued.*

Beyond an inclusive curriculum content, with its intention to improve academic and linguistic results, sits the more holistic aspect. Judith now feels that it is important for the school to be a 'multi-literate site with bilingual signs and texts' and aims to increase the number of multilingual displays of children's work, as well as ensure that other displays are available multilingually. Until recently, multilingual signage was limited to Urdu, perpetuating the deeply-felt sense of this being the most prestigious

of the home languages spoken within the school. This development will, she hopes, help to ensure parents continue to feel welcome in the school, and to legitimise home language use for the children.

## Concluding thoughts

Both Emma and Judith have taken much away from their postgraduate training and now have personal and school goals on home language and home culture work that are as a direct result of the training they have received and the subsequent innovations they have put into place in their school.

*Emma 'intend[s] to develop the Pashto Club further encouraging more parents to help take ownership of their child's language development in first language and model using first language through play, arts and craft, and early reading activities'.*

One of Judith's aims is for the school to become a multi-literate site and for each classroom to have at least one display reflecting each home language present in that particular class of children. As EAL co-ordinator, Judith is now well-placed to continue to disseminate ideas from her practice and from others in the school to the rest of staff, and to encourage their own training.

During this project, individual interests have been awoken and developed, individual practice has grown, and institutional change has been started. Emma now feels that the school's aim is to *'foster what is really the gift of bilingualism, rather than, as some might see it, as a learning difficulty or, as a parent might view it, a hindrance to their child's academic success'*.

All of this is beginning to have a great effect on the children, who have progressed in both their home languages and English, and have shown greater self-esteem and identification with their own, and others', home languages and cultures. It is clear that the new ideas that Judith and Emma gained through their training has had a great impact on their practice and, in turn, on the experiences of the children in their care, other teachers in their school and the local community it serves.

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**Clare Wardman** lives in York, working as a TESOL and linguistics lecturer at York St John University, tutoring in Multilingualism, World Englishes and Language Teaching Methodology. Her research (at the University of York) is concerned with issues related to children with English as an additional language in UK primary schools, particularly focusing on classroom interactions, the provision of support for children and teaching staff, and attitudes towards home languages. Prior to and alongside her current roles, she has worked for a number of years as an English as a Foreign Language and English for Academic Purposes tutor for various language teaching establishments, including the universities of York, Edinburgh and Durham.

**Judith Bell** came to primary school teaching after 24 years in social work hence she has a great interest in inclusion of all kinds. She has always been interested in working with people from different cultures and studied for her PGCE at Bradford College where EAL teaching and multiculturalism were threaded throughout the lectures. She is a primary class teacher and EAL Co-ordinator and has completed MA modules in Meeting The Needs of EAL Learners run by the Local Authority EMA Team in conjunction with Edge Hill University.

**Emma Sharp** lives in Manchester and has taught in Bury for 13 years at a Church of England primary school with a predominantly Muslim intake. Prior to this she worked in a busy, inner city school in which over 54 languages were spoken. Her background is firmly rooted in classroom research for children with English as an additional language and she is currently completing her MA in Education.

**Teaching and  
learning in diverse  
school contexts:  
the journeys of three  
newly-arrived students**

# 4

## Teaching and learning in diverse school contexts: the journeys of three newly-arrived students

Dimitrina Kaneva

### Introduction

Children and young people with English as an additional language (EAL) form an extremely diverse population in terms of their backgrounds, educational experiences and reasons that have led to their temporary or permanent migration to a foreign country. Their bilingual language development provides teaching professionals with further challenges. Focusing on a secondary school located in the north-west of England, this chapter explores the stories of three newly-arrived students as they experience the English educational system. Their views and voices are of students who were at the very early stages of learning English as well as adapting to a new educational context. The students and staff were involved in a small-scale research project exploring different types of support for learning available at the school. In this chapter I will focus on three specific cases in order to explore the strategies that have proven to be successful in this particular circumstance and context. Each of the three children have very different stories in terms of reasons for moving to another country, family circumstances, English language knowledge, prior school experiences, personal characteristics and learning styles. However, they are a representation of some of the subsequent challenges for the school aiming to respond to students' needs and become more inclusive. All three demonstrate eagerness to learn and be successful. They are specific about what makes their learning and general school experience as students more positive and stimulating and what their teachers could do to improve the existing circumstances.

### Toni

On a typical Wednesday morning one of the Year 9 classes is in a mathematics lesson working on a set of worksheets. Toni is a tall lad sitting at the front table facing the teacher and the board. He comes across as a quiet and shy student, well-behaved and focused on his work. Occasionally he speaks to a girl sitting next to him who explains and translates parts of the tasks. Toni and Kasia work as a team, they both come from Poland but while Kasia has been in the country for years, Toni only arrived a few months back:

**Kasia:** *He said that he came to England in September but they didn't have like places in the school so they only took him like in September because they had a spare place.*



Toni enjoys being at Great Northern High School and has already made friends from a range of backgrounds: Polish, English, Czech, with whom he manages a bilingual communication relationship due to similarities in the languages:

**Me:** *With your Czech friends do you speak in English or...?*

**Toni:** *(Kasia translating): Oh, they speak Czech to each other and when he doesn't get the Czech language they speak English ... (translating and explaining the word 'similar') He said that Czech is similar, that's why they talk Czech.*

He is quite open and honest about the excitements and challenges of being an international student, new to the English language and school system:

**Toni:** *(Kasia translating): ...like the worst thing was that he couldn't speak English, he found nothing difficult.*

In terms of academic work, he finds the lessons easy but the language is a problem even though he has previously had some language lessons in Poland. In this respect Kasia's role as an interpreter is crucial. Toni wants to be graphic designer and go to university.

## Dalmar

Dalmar is a Year 10 student. Originally from Somalia, he moved to England with his family six months ago due to political and social circumstances. His family has faced a challenge being split up, as Dalmar currently stays with relatives, while his mother and siblings live in another part of the country. Nevertheless, Dalmar's enthusiasm is contagious despite the difficulties he has been through:

**Dalmar:** *Is that... the school's finish [in Somalia]... Yes, because it's not a school. Two years it's not a school. Because is ... is ... war...*

Moving to England, he has enjoyed school from the first day and met many new friends:

**Dalmar:** *Yes, is good. I love school ... all is coming is friends ... always coming school.*

In terms of the academic side of schooling, Dalmar is specific about how helpful the school team has been to create a safe and stimulating learning environment. Dalmar is a bright student and he is determined that there will be a great future ahead of him now especially with the support of all his teachers – he aspires to be a prime minister, a United Nations ambassador 'like Kofi Annan', or a doctor. He explains that it is important to him to be able to make a difference for other people and make their lives easier.

## Rafael

Rafael is in Year 7. He explains that he has been in England for the past year but he had to wait for a place to start school. In the meantime he was at home until one day he received news that he was due to start school at Great Northern:

**Rafael:** *Yes, and after my mum is going may be two month and going to the registration after is maybe three months is coming my house one guy*

*and tell me what I'm gonna do in school, you know? After tell 'You come tomorrow school' we have to go and pay this, and this, and this [pointing to his uniform].*

Rafael describes himself as being happy at school and he has quickly made friends from different backgrounds, including his classmates and some of the Czech students in different year groups:

**Me:** *Do you have lots of friends now?*

**Rafael:** *Here? Yes. Too much*

**Me:** *Too much? How much is too much?*

**Rafael:** *Maybe [smiling] 30 friends. Yes, because the class is all of it, and Czech people.*

Rafael comes across as a bright and motivated student. He has made good progress in the short time he has been in the school. Prior to joining Great Northern he had been attending a school in the Czech Republic but had not taken any lessons in English so he is at the very early stages of learning the language. However, he draws a number of comparisons between schools in his home country and England which stand out in their thoughtfulness and clarity and he seems to be aware of the things that help him learn and the strategies teachers could employ to make his school and learning experiences better.

## Great Northern High School

The school, Great Northern High, is an average sized inner-city secondary school in the North West of England catering for over 900 students aged 11 to 16. It is located in an area known for its high economic deprivation and influx of immigrants from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds. The number of students eligible for free school meals is well above the national average. However, the school management team has been involved in a complex process of developing appropriate teaching styles and strategies to create a school culture that is welcoming to the various backgrounds and abilities of students:

*We are a mixed, multi-cultural and multi-faith school, and we are very proud of our diversity, where pupils learn in harmony.*

School Prospectus

The student population is extremely diverse in terms of linguistic backgrounds with over 20 different languages represented, various national backgrounds, previous schooling experience and English language proficiency. A large number of new students join or leave the school throughout the academic year, so the school has developed a comprehensive induction system, assessment of language needs and provision incorporating meaningful learning experiences at the appropriate level.

Great Northern is a typical example of an inner-city school in the north-west as the region has faced two major waves of immigration – first from the Commonwealth in the 1950s and 1960s and then from the European Union expansion in 2004 and 2007. Part of a traditionally diverse area, this particular city has been identified as 'a pioneer in multicultural education' (Tomlinson, p. 87) along with some London

boroughs with recognised leading teaching practice and innovation. An important aspect of multicultural education is the fundamental principle of inclusive education or the aim of reaching to all students and creating school environments where individual backgrounds and hence diversity are seen as a resource rather than a barrier to including all students (Ainscow et al. 2006). In this particular instance Great Northern is an example of an inclusive school where students enjoy studying together and learning about each other. The teachers recognise the potential resources in the students' backgrounds and previous experiences and place students at the centre of teaching and learning.

Students traditionally reside in the immediate local area and they have attended one of two feeder primary schools. There have been major changes in the local population profile since the latest expansion of the European Union when a large number of Eastern European (EE) Roma families began arriving seeking better life opportunities. The arrival of the Roma students has posed additional challenges for the school. Most of these new students have had very little or no prior schooling experience and literacy skills despite the fact that they are bilingual and some of them multilingual having picked up a variety of languages while travelling to the UK. At the point of joining the school these students were able to speak at least two languages – a local variation of the Romani language which does not have a written form (Derrington and Kendall 2004) and an official national language.

## The EAL team

The EAL team was the main point of contact for students new to the language, school and English educational system. With both full-time and part-time EAL trained and bilingual staff, the team had adapted and put in place a number of strategies to respond to the individual and group aspects of learning needs of their new students. The team consisted of professionals from diverse backgrounds but with complementary knowledge and experience. For instance Mr Tomash, a qualified primary school teacher from an EE country, was employed as a bilingual support teacher and his role was very much about providing access to learning and the curriculum to students at the very early stages of learning English. His expertise as a primary school practitioner was in line with the school's approach to EAL, given that they were favoured holistic approaches to educating the whole child:

*For KS3 we are running a primary model ... we have to keep it age appropriate as well and we are looking at a thematic approach with a loose thematic thread running through ... we run this curriculum project to engage pupils and it's cross-curricular.*

The rest of the full-time staff in the EAL team included another EE assistant with a background in language studies and interpretation, Miss Bond who is an modern foreign languages (MFL) teacher and Mr Jones – an English language teacher. Mr Hassan, an Arabic speaker, worked as a bilingual assistant. There were also three part-time support assistants from Roma backgrounds all living in the local community. Their role was important in terms of building a good home-school relationship and addressing aspects of behaviour which may otherwise have become problematic. In addition, a number of bilingual support assistants and interpreters have been

employed by the school as required on a temporary basis until students were brought up to speed.

## **Strategies for supporting students with EAL**

The school had in place a number of programmes and strategies to removing barriers to education for students with EAL, including bilingual support and language access groups. In accordance with the changing student profile in recent years the EAL team developed additional approaches in line with their expertise of different learning contexts. This led to the use of an individually tailored approach recognising the learning styles, strengths and weaknesses of students and addressing them appropriately.

### **New arrivals programme**

Great Northern has a well developed programme for introducing newly-arrived students to the school and country in general. All new students are met by the school's attendance team which organises a visit to get to know the students, their family and backgrounds. The attendance team also work with outside agencies and community members providing induction materials, family support and translations. They then complete a pro forma with essential information such as students' languages, previous schooling, special educational needs (SEN), how they have come to the area and the school. Once this information is obtained, it is distributed to all members of staff so that they are aware that there is a new student. In accordance with the abilities and learning needs of students new to the English language, the school provides a range of support options to build students' confidence and enable them to develop coping skills to access the mainstream curriculum.

It is the responsibility of the EAL team to carry out language assessments once the student has settled in and to collect data about individual performance which can be used to track progress and accommodate the student in the most suitable support environment. Where needed, additional bilingual assistants are engaged to reduce the language difficulties and provide translations and additional support.

The school is keen on developing their approach to educating the whole child further and providing opportunities and pathways that are best for each individual student by integrating EAL teaching as part of the whole school curriculum. Nevertheless, the EAL team is responsible for most of the input and planning as well as bridging the experience of attending language support groups and mainstream classes.

### **Community involvement**

Great Northern has built strong community links by involving members of the community sharing similar backgrounds with the students in the daily school activities. Currently there are three parents working with children at both lesson and break times and a support assistant working mainly in lessons, all on a part-time basis. The strength of this approach is particularly evident with the EE Roma groups as the insider knowledge and authority of the community members appears to have a positive impact on students' behaviour and motivation for learning.

Besides setting a good example by being involved in education and emphasising the importance of school for the children to be able to integrate in society and secure good life opportunities, the community support workers are a valuable resource for maintaining home–school links and a mechanism to inform parents about their children without trespassing cultural boundaries (Conteh 2003). Given that the Roma community in the area is rapidly growing such involvement is necessary to maintain good relationships and discipline among the youngsters, some of whom had never been to school before. In terms of inclusive education, this is a ‘school for all’ (Ainscow et al. 2006) where children are educated in the local school which in turn is fully equipped to meet their learning and development needs through valuing diversity and learning from it.

## English language support

English language support is available in two strands – small group activities and individual language support. Both options aim to help students to catch up with the language and prepare them for mainstream based lessons by scaffolding learning, developing grammar knowledge and expanding vocabulary. These classes are focused on language learning and building understanding of more complex terminology and its use in the core subjects – English, mathematics and science as for the rest of the time students are part of mainstream lessons. As students’ vocabulary, understanding and language proficiency improves, they spend increasing time in ability-based mainstream classes until they are fully integrated. The EAL team carry out assessments of students’ language levels every six weeks and upon reaching a certain level of confidence using the English language students are expected to be fully integrated in mainstream and to be able to cope with its learning demands.

## Small group withdrawals

Dalmar was one of the students attending access groups taught by EAL teachers and bilingual assistants due to his very limited knowledge of English when joining the school. However, there had been a recent reduction in the amount of time he spent in small groups. When I met him he was working to an individual plan, with one science and two English lessons in the EAL resource room and the rest based in a mainstream class. Dalmar enjoyed this type of support as he felt it enabled him to access the content and language in his mainstream classes. This built his confidence, ensuring his further success. The approach made sense in his opinion as it was helping with language progression and confidence:

**Dalmar:** *Science I’m not good because my English is not good. It not bad ...*

**Me:** *Ok, so do you think that when you learn more English you’ll be better in science?*

**Dalmar:** *Yes.*

In terms of learning, Dalmar was interested in everything happening at school and said he liked all subjects except art because he is ‘*not as good at drawing*’. He is extremely aware of the importance of learning English to a high standard in order to maximise his opportunities at school and beyond. However, he linked his academic

abilities and achievement with his limited language knowledge in the sense that he even remarked that he is 'not clever' sometimes. He claimed to be good at subjects that require less language knowledge and is more based on individual projects:

**Dalmar:** *I am good at media. Because is media and is sometimes is the week is videos, is good, sometimes is different, then is song, and you like sometimes is like songs. Is music is feeling.*

His last remarks suggest that a varied curriculum in terms of difficulty and activities was his personal preference. He obviously felt more confident in subjects where less language was required but nevertheless recognised the importance of learning English with his EAL teachers.

This group language intervention has been particularly successful at the school not only because of the caring attitude and dedication of staff, but because of the development of a safe environment to learn and to make friends at the initial stages of getting used to the school.

Toni was also part of the access groups at the beginning of his journey at Great Northern. However, he did not like the idea of being withdrawn from mainstream as this made him feel different and distanced from what the rest of the students were learning in class. Additionally, time spent in the access groups proved to be confusing for him as he was exposed to a number of different languages on a daily basis. In this case and given the individual preference of students, the EAL team adopted a different approach to boosting Toni's skills and language proficiency.

## Individual language support

A variation of the access groups was individual language support delivered by teachers from the EAL team. As Toni was not keen on group support he continued having language support individually. He attended intensive language classes with Miss Bond for two months which had a good impact on his learning and confidence as soon afterwards he was fully integrated in the mainstream classroom in all subjects and placed in a top set due to his high results.

Toni had been studying English in Poland where he felt that a number of conditions acted as barriers to his success:

**Toni:** *... when in Poland teachers speak English and Polish because I'm getting confused what... and I not know which one to listen ... [here] I learned a lot better than Poland.*

However, even though he described the experience of having his English language teacher mixing both Polish and English as a negative one, it probably had a positive impact on his quick progress at Great Northern (Cummins 2001).

Another interesting outcome for Toni was that usually, upon leaving the access groups, students with EAL were placed in bottom sets, however, he progressed to top sets in all subject areas:

**Me:** *You are in the top set, is that helping you?*

**Toni:** *(Kasia translating): He said that he doesn't think it's difficult ...*

**Me:** *Do you think it's better if you are in the top set?*

**Toni:** *(Kasia translating): He thinks it's better because all of the people speak English and he doesn't confuse like when there's like foreign people and they speak other languages and he doesn't confuse the languages.*

The story of Toni is interesting because of the significant progress he has made over the first three months at the school and the benefits arising from peer support and language translations. However he would still face difficulties at times:

**Kasia:** *He said that students [confirms translation] he said that if he's done something wrong, they've been mean to him.*

**Me:** *What do you mean by this?*

**Kasia:** *Aha... they laugh at him when he doesn't get something and he said it's usually a really easy question, for them I mean.*

**Me:** *You knew the answer but you didn't understand the question I suppose?*

**Kasia:** *I mean if he had a translator then he would get it.*

Even with small challenges along the way, Toni's is a success story as most of the international students at Great Northern spend an average of six months with intensive language support before moving fully into mainstream. His prior schooling experience, high achievement and motivation for learning have made Toni a high attaining student, even in a challenging and new environment.

## Use of L1/bilingual support

Bilingual support, or the use of students' home languages, is a commonly used strategy at Great Northern, part of the daily routine in all aspects of the school life. Community members use their home languages to communicate school rules and expectations and to translate in lessons for the EE Roma students. A number of bilingual assistants and some of the teachers speak students' first languages in every lesson.

## Individual bilingual support

While in mainstream lessons Dalmar worked with Mr Hassan to help him with the pace of the class and translations. He was a confident user of two languages already:

**Dalmar:** *Is my country is first language [Somali], second is Arabic and I also English.*

**Me:** *So you speak three languages. Can you write in all these three languages?*

**Dalmar:** *Somali – yes, Arabic – a little bit.*

His bilingual support was in Arabic, so he constantly had to operate in three different languages. In addition to this, Dalmar benefitted from the opportunity to have his work checked and was given reassurance that he was doing well – he seemed keen on getting things right the first time and frequently sought approval of his work by asking Mr Hassan, the teacher or even me to check it. During mainstream lessons he received clarifications and explanations from Mr Hassan as needed, but

the school had developed an excellent strategy for deployment of staff and using their expertise fully. Assistants were not attached to a particular student, rather the group as a whole. So as well as supporting Dalmar, Mr Hassan was also there for all the other students. This was beneficial for Dalmar in the sense that he would not get too dependent on his one-to-one support forcing him to develop a degree of independence which will be a useful skill once he is fully integrated into mainstream. At the same time, the rest of the students also got support from the extra adults in the classroom and the idea of support was interlinked with the class as a whole rather than individual students being 'in need' (Booth and Ainscow 2002).

## Group bilingual support

Rafael's case was different from the other two boys as his Year 7 class consisted entirely of EAL students. There were 23 in all, most of who from an EE Roma background, and all were at various stages of learning English and with varying levels of prior schooling experience. The class was taught by three EAL teachers and support assistants in core subjects and the rest of the curriculum was taught by mainstream teachers with heavy reliance on translation and parallel in-class support.

Rafael liked all of the EAL teachers and saw their role as being important for his progress:

**Me:** *Do you remember when you first came to this school and you didn't speak much English, was that difficult for you?*

**Rafael:** *Yes, when speaking teachers to me and I'm little bit don't understand.*

**Me:** *And what do you think helped you to understand more?*

**Rafael:** *The speaking of English.*

He shared the view of the other two boys that they should learn English well and quickly in order to succeed. In terms of what makes a good teacher and a good lesson Rafael talked about understanding and learning the language:

**Rafael:** *Mr Tomash [in English] is good and the lesson is good. Because it is when he's speaking to me and I'm think that I'm good. And when I'm go another lesson, may be erm... on Spanish, and may be no good because is speaking to me and is speaking small.*

Rafael was also very resourceful in the way he addressed his language learning by making a suggestion which would improve his student experience:

**Rafael:** *Yes, erm... I want.. I'm tell to Miss I want to change one class because the class is.. art, you know?*

**Me:** *Ok, and what would you like to change in art?*

**Rafael:** *English, yes.*

**Me:** *Instead of art, you'd like to have more English? Why is that?*

**Rafael:** *Because I want to speaking and listen more.*

*Later he also discussed the possibility of taking school work home:*

**Rafael:** *Yeah, I want to tell Miss because when I'm go to school and after I'm go home and nothing homework.*



**Me:** *So you'd want to have some work for home?*

**Rafael:** *Yes*

**Me:** *What kind of work?*

**Rafael:** *Maths and English. And after the next day ... check.*

The choice of being given additional work in English is self-explanatory given his attitude to learning and previous experience at school where he had homework every day. Maths, on the other hand, was his favourite subject because of he found it easy to understand what was going on in the lesson and what was required of him:

**Rafael:** *Oh because you count and writing erm... you know when Miss tells 'copy this on the board and on the book' and is copy the number and that was 20 times and three or plus or minus.*

This whole class approach has proven to be successful because it extends the children's literacy knowledge and confidence in home languages. The development of a safe environment for students until they are fully equipped to manage in a more English-based environment is an advantage of this approach and students feel positive about it. Furthermore, the bilingual teachers and assistants have been successful in finding ways to relate learning to the children's own stories and backgrounds by inviting external visitors and speakers and linking schooling with students' aspirations, making the lessons more relevant and engaging. To counteract the possible disadvantages of this approach as a long-term strategy isolating whole groups of students as in need of special support and attention, the EAL team plan to make changes as students progress within the school and to reduce the amount of bilingual support they receive so that they become more engaged with the rest of the school.

## Team-teach approach

A team-teach approach is currently under development, linked to the thematic approach mentioned previously. The team-teach strategy involves two members of the EAL team working alongside each other to maximise the opportunities for learning of their students. The lessons use the wealth of the children's languages to describe key words and build understanding by learning about each other and from each other, acknowledging children's prior linguistic knowledge and building upon it (Cummins 2001). In these lessons students sometimes teach their teachers new words and expressions and this not only reinforces learning but also increases their motivation and engagement. There are many bilingual posters and displays in the EAL room and around the school, as well as translated school rules and consequences, bilingual workbooks and dictionaries. Students and teachers work together and sometimes I saw teachers using the dictionaries trying to communicate something to their students and learn new words. Rafael benefited from this approach and he said that he liked it because the teachers would speak to him and help him understand extending his knowledge and also increasing his confidence as a person with multilingual abilities. He mentioned that this was not the case in other subjects where teachers would just explain and move on.

## Peer support

Kasia and Toni always sat together in lessons. She translated instructions and gave examples and explanations to help him get on with the work. Toni found this type of support helpful and non-discriminating in contrast with the access groups or withdrawals:

**Toni:** *(Kasia translating): ...it's better because all of the people speak English and he doesn't get confuse like when there's foreign people and they speak other languages and he doesn't confuse the languages.*

Pairing up children to support each other with the language not only enables them to make friends and work in a supportive environment, it also provides good role models for the newly-arrived children. And while the new child is gaining knowledge and confidence, the more advanced child is developing their bilingual abilities and working with information in two languages (Cummins 2000).

Kasia mentioned that translating was sometimes difficult especially when she was not familiar with the terminology in her first language in more specialised subjects such as maths or science:

**Kasia:** *It's sometimes difficult in Maths because they have all the equations and I don't know how to explain. Yes, I know it, but I just ... can't think of a word to explain it in Polish.*

However, her role was greatly beneficial to her own skills as in addition to course and lesson work, she had to process the information twice by translating it and this would strengthen her abilities in both languages. This is why Toni would actually be happy with more peer support:

**Kasia:** *He said that he'd be happy if someone like me was in his lessons and help him and translate ... Yes, I mean I have other Polish friends but I have loads of lessons with him and ... my best friend is Polish but she doesn't translate to him. I don't know, because she's always quiet, I mean she knows a lot of English but she's always quiet and stuff.*

Other students also expressed interest in peer support and working with a friend sharing the same language but it was not always possible:

**Me:** *Do you think it would be easier for you if you had somebody to speak in Czech in the lessons?*

**Rafael:** Yes

**Me:** *Is there another Czech student in your class? In Year 7?*

**Rafael:** *In my class – no. Yes, yes, another class in Year 7 one guy is.*

## Concluding thoughts

The stories of Dalmar, Toni and Rafael have been selected to illustrate the variety of approaches to working with EAL students developed by staff at Great Northern High School. The enthusiasm and desire to learn and develop are evident and seem to be a driving force for both students and teachers. Great Northern is a great place to be and to learn as there is strong commitment to providing students with the best possible opportunities.

All three students were happy with the variety of opportunities for learning they had and it was evident that the school worked on an individual basis to meet learning needs. A strong message communicated through the differentiated and individualised approach taken is that students know their preferred learning styles and modes and they should be consistent participants in education. An important lesson they had learned along the way was that what works for one student or a small group may not work for someone else, which prompted teachers to carefully consider what their students had to say about their experiences at school. A number of suggestions were made by the boys with regards to what could be improved. Even though they were generally satisfied with the support and teaching, Dalmar and Rafael wanted to see more language work so that they could advance faster. Toni had a preference for more opportunities to sit with a bilingual friend who could translate for him.

There is no straightforward way to develop a strategy for diversity that works in all contexts. However, such a strategy would likely include a consideration of the context; it would make teaching and learning accessible to all students as a group and individually, and maximise the value of diversity within the school curriculum and culture; it would ensure that the backgrounds and knowledge of all students are valued and utilised within the curriculum (Conteh 2003, Gregory 2002).

These principles reflect an inclusive school agenda where the local school is the 'school for all' valuing extended community partnerships and the backgrounds of all students as a resource in teaching and learning (Ainscow et al. 2006). The inclusive school is one that constantly seeks improvement and development of new ways of working and understanding barriers to learning that move practice forward (Booth and Ainscow 2002). Furthermore, inclusion is about values and principles underpinning the development of a comprehensive curriculum acknowledging and building on students' experiences and day-to-day knowledge. For EAL learners this means using students' prior knowledge and diverse language, cultural and educational experiences in a system which builds on learning about and from each other.

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**In search of high level  
learner engagement:  
autobiographical  
approaches with  
children and adults**

# 5

## In search of high level learner engagement: autobiographical approaches with children and adults

Dina Mehmedbegović

### Introduction

This chapter provides insights into the efforts of a teacher (the author of this chapter), new to working with migrant and refugee children, to develop an approach which aimed to engage children at different levels of English proficiency, and with different levels of literacy skills in any language they use and that was adaptable for different age groups.

As a new teacher in charge of developing support for new arrivals and refugees in a very diverse inner-London comprehensive secondary school, with 20 per cent of the children on roll identified as refugees, I was looking for recommendations on strategies to engage with these groups of children. Having consulted relevant literature and key websites, one strategy stood out: autobiographical writing. It seemed to capture many of the most important principles of English as an additional language (EAL) practice: using prior experiences in learning; securing relevance to all children; and providing opportunities in which every child is an expert.

Inspired by my readings I began developing the initial assessment tools for all new arrivals, structuring them around autobiographical writing, using first languages and English, where possible. In the case of children, who were new to schooling and had no literacy in any language, a structured speaking activity was used with the help of interpreters.

What became obvious very quickly was that there was a lot sensitivity involved in topics such as home, family and prior experiences. Some of these children were arriving from refugee camps or conflict zones; some were unaccompanied minors, some had a false identity for various reasons to protect their safety. Understandably so, there was often an unmistakable sense of discomfort with anything autobiographical.

Many of these children had gone through extraordinary experiences which could either frame them as victims or resilient young individuals. It was important to prevent them internalising often well meaning, but pity-type messages that people arriving from conflict zones encounter on an everyday basis, which pave the way

of developing victim identities. Just a simple question: 'Where do you come from?' will result in a very different conversation for somebody coming from Brazil and somebody coming from Somalia. A new arrival from Brazil will almost certainly be talking about the natural beauty of Brazil, world class football, good food and will walk off with a sense of pride, feeling good about his/her own identity. However, for somebody from Somalia the same question will almost certainly lead into a conversation which will centre on expressions of sorrow and concern. While the conversation might be appropriate and well meaning, it will almost certainly have a negative impact on that child. For Somali children, a 'where do you come from' conversation will almost certainly never be about anything else but war and its consequences rather than something which a child can feel proud of. A Somali child will walk away from such conversations with a guaranteed additional burden, which, if internalised, moves them a step closer to developing aspects of victim identity. As I write this chapter Mo Farah, originally from Somalia, wins two gold medals for Britain in the London 2012 Olympic Games. This historic achievement for British athletics will most certainly change the identity messages received by Somali children in their immediate and wider community. They are very likely to be hearing that there is a reason to be proud of their background and contribution of their compatriot. Mo Farah's gold medals will shed sparks of pride, hope and high expectations over the experiences of many Somali children in our schools for years to come.

To conclude this section, the questions which emerged for me while developing suitable strategies for working with new arrivals were:

- how does one structure the use of autobiographical approaches, which bring relevance to all in the classroom and engagement with prior experience, without intimidation?
- how can this work take every child along the path of resilience and affirmation?
- how do we provide opportunities for children to tell their own narratives which will challenge stereotypes imposed by media or even curriculum?

The search for an appropriate strategy continued.

## Identity

One piece of reading seemed to provide the vision and richness that could help me take autobiographical writing into new depths and dimensions. In several of his publications Cummins (2000, 2001) writes about two principles: Maximum Cognitive Engagement and Maximum Identity Investment. Maximum Cognitive Engagement is at the core of our understanding of how crucial it is to secure experiences for EAL learners which are not plagued by the deficit model stereotypes and low ability setting.

The fact that the deficit model still prevails in our practice is evident in the fact that too many EAL children are still being placed on the special educational needs register simply because they are beginners in English. Terminology such as 'children with problems or difficulties in English', 'children with no language', 'severe EAL', 'children with bilingual problems' reflect the thinking that not being able to speak English yet, is a deficiency. The experiences of bilingual children are often centred

on what these children do not have – competency in English. Their most relevant previous experience, the use of their home language, is hardly ever called upon in a structured and planned way. We have a system that claims inclusivity, equality of opportunity and access to the full curriculum. However, in practice, although new arrivals have physical access and attend lessons, they do so without appropriate in-class support and are not able to access the content of lessons, leading to disengagement, loss of self esteem and possibly to behaviour issues and truanting.

Maximum Cognitive Engagement Principle insists on learning that is appropriate to one's cognitive abilities. These are not determined, and must never be limited, by the level of proficiency in English or any other language used as a medium of instruction. In other words, if a child can do logarithms in maths when given instructions in Chinese, it is not acceptable to give him/her prolonged tasks of adding or multiplying in a context where English is used, because he/she is a beginner in English. Being a beginner in English does not by definition make this child a beginner in any other subject area. Although negotiating language barriers with cognitively appropriate teaching and learning remains one of the most challenging aspects of working with new arrivals, teachers must strive to find a way of making cognitively appropriate work accessible for children who are developing their academic language proficiency.

Maximum Identity Investment, placed by Cummins equally in terms of weight and importance to Maximum Cognitive Engagement, – is not nearly as prominent in EAL practice. There are many outwards demonstrations that schools celebrate and acknowledge the diversity of their communities. However, I would like to argue that fully understanding and implementing Maximum Identity Investment Principle means going beyond celebrating diversity. It underpins practices which fully integrate diversity as a resource for teaching and learning. As such it has a potential to transform the experiences of all learners.

In this exploration of Maximum Identity Investment Principle it is important to consider Cummins' use of terminology. When it comes to cognitive functioning, the emphasis is on 'engagement', while the identity aspect is about 'investment'. The concept of investment brings with it the notion of capital, in this case: cultural, linguistic and social capital and the notion of ownership and commitment.

I would like to suggest that Identity Investment is about creating conditions in educational settings where children build on what they have and what they know; their prior experiences are not dismissed, but 'allowed in' as the foundation stone of their current and future experiences and learning. And this principle is important for all children – immigrants or not. It is about affirmation of different socio-economic, class, ethnic, regional, local and individual identities. Every child needs to learn through education first of all how to know, understand, analyse and critically approach his own individual situation within the history of a community and a social group, to be able to see the bigger picture and gain understanding of the self within it. That understanding is essential in enhancing one's potential to achieve, not only in terms of school grades, but on a long term basis, in terms of social mobility.

I have come across children who have lacked opportunities to gain such understanding of their backgrounds and they were left battling with that vacuum



in their own ways. A Kosovan boy who was academically very able, but regularly excluded for fighting in the playground, revealed that his *'where do you come from'* conversation led to responses of the type: *'Kosovo is not a country'*. Since he lacked arguments and historical perspective, he did not know how to engage with that challenge through discussion, so he opted for a fight. In his own words: *'Miss, I don't know what to tell them, so I punch them.'* He welcomed an offer to join a Kosovan complementary school and have the opportunity to learn about the history of Kosovo. His understanding of the political complexities surrounding the official status of Kosovo was so directly linked to his survival in the playground, that it was crucial for adults around him to appreciate that even though he was only 14 years old, he urgently needed that understanding of his background.

These types of insights into the experiences of refugee children led me to develop further my thinking about autobiographical approaches. It became clear that teachers should provide structured opportunities for all children to first of all explore their backgrounds and then share their narratives. If these explorations happen facilitated by a teacher with clear learning objectives, they can replace and prevent often alienating interactions, as the example given above.

## Model

The initiative I was developing was piloted as a part of an international day in a secondary school with a Year 7 class (11–12 years old) and had as its central subject *'Places we had to leave'*. I selected this subject as a universal human experience linking an ordinary living and refugee experience. All of the children in this Year 7 class left their primary school a year ago. Even if they had never experienced moving home until then, changing schools, class, peers and teachers was a big change that they had all encountered. Conscious of the fact that *'Places we had to leave'* may be too close to the experiences of some of the refugee children, I also provided an alternative title: *'Places we want to go to'*. The main aim of the project was explained as: writing and presenting about a place that *'made them who they are'*. They were given the option of expanding these themes, to include: a place which was significant in their experience, perhaps the place where they were born, a place they dream of going to, a place where they had an extraordinary experience, or just a great holiday. The project was thus introduced with an overarching theme of *'Our special places'*, with many different options.

By focusing on a place, I intended to allay any pressure they might feel about talking about their families or themselves. This presentation could be as personal or impersonal as they wished. If they did not want to look into the past, they did not have to. They could write about where they see themselves in the future – *'A place I want to go to'*. In my own experience of doing this project over five years, with children as young as eight and young people at the age of 16, it was only once that a group of children did a presentation on an utopian island they imagined and once a child talked about where she lived then, the rest of the children did presentations about backgrounds of their families and their countries of origin.

The key part of this initiative was to provide a model which children could use to shape their own narratives. The model was based on five multimedia elements. Multimedia was used with the intention to enhance engagement and bridge the literacy gap for children who had gaps in their education and therefore lacked the appropriate level of literacy skills for their age.

I began with an introduction to my special place, Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, using a photograph of two of Sarajevo's bridges. I asked the children if they had heard of Sarajevo and what they knew about it. Most children know about the significance of Sarajevo in the First World War. On the second bridge in this photograph stood Gavrilo Princip, a 19-year old Bosnian Serb, who assassinated Archduke Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. This incident triggered the First World War and ended the colonial rule in Bosnia. Gavrilo Princip, celebrated in Bosnia as a national hero, was tortured to death by the Austro-Hungarian authorities. While talking about this photograph I also share with children that I lived in the house to the left of the first bridge and tell them a little bit about student life in Sarajevo.

I continued with a soundtrack to a television programme that I watched at the time I started school. This soundtrack provides a way into talking about different experiences of schooling and the value systems they are based on. This element was chosen after witnessing how certain systems were devalued through history teaching. For example, a lesson where communism and fascism were compared concluding that communism equalled fascism, was extremely confusing for children from former Soviet Union and other socialist countries such as Poland, former Yugoslavia and China, who knew that communist countries fought against the Nazis in the Second World War.

I then used a photo of the Bosnian National Library, which served the purpose of talking about historical research, using primary sources in public archives, introducing the excitement of finding key, original documents. This part of the narrative was linked to my own experience of doing historical research in the archives of this library. Since the Bosnian Library was destroyed during the war in the 1990s, it also gave me the opportunity to address the strategy of cultural genocide and attempts to erase the history of a people.

I then used three other artefacts:

- Two short documentaries made by British journalists which challenge stereotypical media images of war torn countries. They make the point that it is important to show how people preserve their dignity in such circumstances and continue with activities which are meaningful to them. The two examples included a cello player and a ballet dancer in Sarajevo who responded to the destruction around them by developing special arts initiatives to keep spirits high in a city under siege.
- A poem by Mak Dizdar, a Bosnian poet whose collection *Stone Sleepers* was translated into English. This allowed us to explore and encourage bilingual writing. I share with children my first bilingual book and explore with them the complexities of translating poetry. They are encouraged to look for examples in their own language or to translate poems and stories which are important to them.

- A comedy clip filmed by a group called *Surrealists of Sarajevo*, who can be compared to Monty Python in the UK. This clip was filmed during the siege with citizens of Sarajevo taking part in it. It was one of the initiatives to maintain hope and community spirit during famine and extreme living conditions. I finish with the point that humour reaches out across cultures and provides more positive ways of engaging with extraordinary circumstances.

In conclusion I make the point that the narrative I am presenting is dated, but it relates to a crucial period in my life which brought unexpected upheaval and change. Also my narrative of Sarajevo in a way stands frozen in time. I have not yet been back to visit after I narrowly escaped being caught in the siege, in 1992.

## **Collaborative classroom**

In the process of developing this initiative, it became obvious that adults in the classroom needed to be included too, not only as facilitators or teachers, but participants in the same way that children and young people are. Autobiographical approaches are often used in a one-sided way and opportunities are missed to create conditions for meaningful balance of power between children and adults. Every autobiographical initiative asks children to share their thoughts, feelings, experiences in a more meaningful and insightful way, than any other style of teaching. This also means that children may experience being more vulnerable because they share and expose some aspects of themselves that they may have not done otherwise. Adults should be included in the process of sharing narratives not only because they act as models for children, but also because their inclusion is an important step in creating a collaborative classroom where adults, as much as children, provide an insight into their own identity.

During the process of disseminating this initiative in different schools, I insisted that the teachers hosting this initiative in their classes needed to fully participate too. I often came across resistance. Sometimes the reason given was: 'Who wants to know about a small town in England, where I come from? Who wants to know about Preston?' Once the understanding was achieved that most children were interested in who their teacher was as a person, there were some impressive presentations done by the teachers, which were warmly received by their classes. The sense of reciprocating in opening up and appreciating the historical circumstances, which had shaped the lives of our communities and families was inspiring.

In their evaluations the children talked about hearing bits of stories about the journeys of their families in different occasions, but only now that they had done this project had they put all the pieces together and had a better understanding of the whole narrative. In one class an 11-year-old Russian boy did a presentation on Moscow and broke down in tears while talking about the millions who perished defending Moscow in the Second World War. Suddenly, numbers in history books and lessons had a more personal meaning, and he understood how these big historical events impacted on his family and his own life.

The teachers reflected on the fact that many children presented in front of a class for the first time since their arrival. The principle of every child being an expert

on their own background and history, seemed to have resulted in the intended enhanced engagement.

## Examples from classrooms

One of the partner schools in the development of the autobiographical approach outlined in this chapter was an inner London primary school catering for children aged 3–11, with 220 children on roll and early years provision (3–5). Its diversity was reflective of the inner London community context in which it was located, with 60 per cent of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds. The ethnic mixture included pupils from: European, Black Caribbean, Asian, and mixed backgrounds. The staff reflected the local community and pupils. They were an international team from different European, UK, and Australian backgrounds led by a head teacher of an Asian origin. The school was evaluated by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) as outstanding and it had received a number of national awards.

This project had been developed as a partnership between me as an EAL consultant for the relevant local authority, and this school. One of the teachers, who was appointed as the co-ordinator for English as an additional language and gifted and talented aspects of the curriculum, had been the key member of staff co-ordinating this project at the school level. The Year 6 teacher was my classroom-based partner.

The Year 6 classroom itself, where this work was conducted, was already an environment reflective of its learning community. Its central display was: ‘Where we come from’, consisting of a map of the world with photos of the pupils pasted onto 23 different countries in four different continents, highlighting their diversity. Their common values and shared space was symbolised by arrows linking each of these photos with London, their school, and their classroom.

The autobiographical approach was introduced as a part of the structured speaking and listening curriculum unit. The multimedia introduction narrative provided by me as the guest speaker was used to model a way of developing autobiographical writing and oral presentations using: photographs, films, music, and literature. Following the model lesson, students worked with their class teacher for three weeks researching their backgrounds, talking to their family members, collecting multimedia elements and developing a presentation which was based on a poster with written text and visual elements. On the day scheduled for pupils’ presentations, there were a number of guests in the classroom: myself, as the project leader and the adult who introduced the work, the teacher mentioned above with responsibilities for English as an additional language and the head teacher. These guests were invited with the intention of giving the children a real audience and a sense of occasion. Everybody in the class of 26 students presented during this half-day session. For the purposes of this chapter I have selected one example:

Two boys, who sit next to each other in this class, presented the following work. The first boy showed a photo of Hamburg after bombing at the end of the Second World War, which led into an introduction about his German roots and family attachments to that city. He told the class about his grandmother who grew up in Hamburg, his

mother who was born there, and he himself had been there frequently for visits. One of his photographs was of his parents, sister, and him in front of his grandmother's home. He proudly spoke about being bilingual in English and German, which resulted in his having passed a GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) in German at 11 rather than the normal 16. His next photograph was of a teenage girl in a Hitler Youth uniform. This was his grandmother at the beginning of the Second World War. The key part of his narrative was the insight into the experience of being forced to join an organisation such as the Hitler Youth and the theme of survival during a war, followed by the experience of bombing, living in an occupied country and time spent in a Russian labour camp.

The second boy showed a photograph of a Jewish ghetto: the other side of the Second World War, presenting the experience of those who suffered the greatest losses. His narrative concerned a family originating from Russia, moving to Germany, with some being imprisoned in the German concentration camps, and others joining the French resistance. He used a mixture of family photographs and photographs from textbooks, which illustrated the narrative about the lives in ghettos based on conversations with his family members. This boy also mentioned how he had heard fractions of these stories during family gatherings or just mentioned in different instances, but only now that he had done the research for this project and written things down, did he feel that he could put the pieces together in a way that made sense and enabled him to have a better understanding of his family.

These two boys provided genuine individual insights, albeit on a small scale, into one of the most studied history topics. They referred to concepts and institutions that every European pupil will come across at some point in their education. Even though they were from two opposing sides in the conflict, their stories had a strong shared aspect: the struggle of an individual for survival and the suffering that conflicts bring to all involved. The recurring mention of the concentration camps was a reminder of how similar these experiences could be.

Reflecting on the role of project leader, I need to say that attending the pupils' presentations, only to discover that one of the posters included an extremely sensitive photograph, in fact what can be seen as a taboo photograph, of a family member in a Hitler Youth uniform, I felt uncomfortable and anxious about the presentation that was coming. I was relieved that the grandmother was not portrayed as a Nazi supporter, but as a young person being forced to wear Nazi symbols. However, only when the presentations were completed without any incident in the class, was I able to appreciate the fact that this episode demonstrated the existing levels of trust in this school and the classroom; that children and families felt safe to share even sensitive details. As an external school partner I perceived as a crucial ingredient for this level of trust the fact that the small size of this school meant that every teacher knew every child on roll and his/her family. Therefore, what came as a surprise to me and stemmed from a lack of familiarity with pupils' backgrounds, the class teacher was familiar with and was at ease to have it shared in the classroom.

However, these two presentations also show that even conflicts which are historically remote are still very much present in family interactions and narratives. They still

influence the identities of children and young people in classrooms today, as when, for example children of German background report being bullied in the playground when the Second World War is taught. This episode also highlights the fact that in a global city, such as London, teachers need to be skilled in negotiating politically and historically sensitive issues when they arise.

Autobiographical work in different subject areas, which encourages children to explore, research, and share their backgrounds, creates conditions for 'Maximum Identity Investment' learning to take place (after Cummins, 2001, p. 263). In the process of sharing their own narratives with peers and teachers, children experience diversity in a very personal way. Providing structured opportunities for children, and adults to share narratives of themselves facilitates both: intercultural learning and practices affirmative of the self and others.

## Latest developments and next steps

At the European level a project has been developed that spans across different generations and emphasises the importance of individual experiences. Although the London project presented in this chapter has no direct links with this bigger initiative at the European level, there are many common features. The European Memories Initiative ([www.europeanmemories.eu](http://www.europeanmemories.eu)) makes a case for developing an understanding of history which is not only about accumulating pieces of information, but also about having a personal insight into the emotions and thinking of individuals caught up in processes of upheaval and change.

Recently the Council of Europe published *The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (2009). This document is essentially a toolkit for reflecting on one's experiences of otherness. The reflection process is guided by a sequence of questions based on relevant research and it is adapted for different age ranges. The aim of this toolkit is to provide educators and young people with the means of reaching a better understanding of the self and others. Its goal is to support the development of relevant skills and intercultural competencies. It has multiple possibilities of use: as self-reflection or self-assessment tools, not shared with anybody; for one-to-one work and confidential sharing, or for collaborative learning in classroom or group settings. In terms of its place in the learning cycles or curricula, this approach can be built in at regular intervals with the intention of following the process of developing awareness and skills or it can be used as a response to a positive or negative event (study visit or a racial incident).

For educators enthusiastic to use these approaches in their settings it will be of great interest to engage with the initiative: European Memories. This project, which aims to develop social and civic competencies of European citizens, provides a central space using a web portal ([www.europeanmemories.eu](http://www.europeanmemories.eu)) with the purpose of: archiving narratives; providing guidance on using multimedia (audio, visual and written media) to produce narratives and providing access to a network of institutions working in the field of autobiography and memory.

Apart from virtual and web based support and activities, there are also opportunities to engage in real life activities such as '*Narrating Europe*' competition and the

'*European Autobiography Festival*'. The collection of work entered for the competition is published in seven languages, while the Festival offers opportunities for training in using autobiographical and historical methods.

## Concluding thoughts

In conclusion, there are four key principles of autobiographical approaches that need to be highlighted. Firstly, memories are not only about the past, but are about self-recognition in the present and act as a resource for understanding our contemporary reality. Secondly, having insight into the personal experience of others is the foundation for peaceful co-existence in a diverse society. Thirdly, autobiographical work provides a framework suitable for cross-generational work; from young children to senior citizens, every individual can contribute his or her own unique and equally valuable insight. And finally, every individual is an expert on what is their own interpretation of their background and past. This final point is especially important in the context of children who are new arrivals and new to learning the language used in school. Making sure they engage in activities where they feel competent and confident is essential for their self-esteem and future achievement. The fact that European Memories advocate multimedia approaches and writing in different languages opens up multiple opportunities for different learners.

The model outlined in this chapter and the European Memories project demonstrate the wealth of potential that autobiographical approaches have in advancing intercultural understanding and communication. They remind us yet again that the most valuable resources we have in our classrooms are children and teachers themselves and their experiences. All too often curriculum and teaching appear disconnected and irrelevant to children's lives. Autobiographical approaches provide the highest level of learner engagement and relevance. With this in mind educators at all levels, primary to higher education and teacher trainers, should be looking for ways which will enable them to exploit autobiographical approaches for the benefits of enhanced participation, achievement and intercultural competencies.

As I conclude this chapter, I hope that it will not only serve as a model for using autobiographical approaches, but that it will also encourage educators and readers of this book to search for their own strategies of engaging with new arrivals and immigrant children.

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**Curriculum  
innovations for  
students learning  
EAL in mainstream  
state secondary  
schools in England –  
a cross-curricular  
EAL pedagogy for  
teacher development**

# 6

## Curriculum innovations for students learning EAL in mainstream state secondary schools in England – a cross-curricular EAL pedagogy for teacher development

Sara Green

### Introduction

Pupils in mainstream<sup>4</sup> state schools in the UK come from diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Within this group are pupils for whom English is as an additional language (EAL) who are increasing in number year on year. Local and national data show that rates of progress of many students in this group and their levels of academic achievement continue to lag behind that of their English speaking peer group. In this discussion I will focus on a particular challenge for secondary schools in England in meeting the needs of students aged 14–16, arriving late in their school careers and seeking a school place, although the issues I will touch upon are relevant to EAL students more generally. In the absence of clear national guidelines on the distinctive curriculum entitlement of newly-arrived EAL students, decisions about what to teach and how to address the initial language development needs of EAL learners from diverse backgrounds have been largely left to individual schools.

EAL provision for new arrivals focused on a discrete language curriculum (taught as in an EFL course setting) away from the mainstream school curriculum (in school or where students were ‘bussed’ to off-site ‘language centres’) was deemed to be racist by the Calderdale Report in 1985, a stance that was later endorsed by the Race Relations Act 1986. This was further endorsed in 1988, when a statutory National Curriculum was introduced for the first time in England. This established the principle of an ‘entitlement curriculum’ whereby all learners, including EAL learners who were newly-arrived, had a right of access to the school curriculum with EAL learning and teaching integrated into all subject areas.

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<sup>4</sup> For this discussion a mainstream state school is one that caters for the full range of curriculum subjects and all pupils, except those with the most severe learning difficulties (i.e. the majority of schools across the country).

Since this time, although in many schools across the country and particularly in secondary schools, teachers have necessarily continued to offer some support for new arrivals outside of the mainstream classroom, government policy on teaching and learning EAL in schools has been officially oriented towards what is called a ‘mainstreamed approach’. The expectation of this approach is that the needs of all learners including the language development needs of EAL learners will be addressed in the mainstream primary or secondary school classroom by class and subject teachers rather than through withdrawal.

To support mainstream teachers with the inclusion of all learners in learning, non statutory National Curriculum guidance has been provided on how to meet the language learning needs of EAL learners in curriculum subject teaching (for example in the literacy and mathematics strategies in primary and mainstream curriculum subjects in secondary). For EAL teachers working with their mainstream colleagues, this has provided a clear focus in their work to adapt the curriculum for diverse classroom settings, even when in the context of increasingly heavy prescription in the primary (Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2<sup>5</sup> literacy and mathematics) and lower secondary phases of schooling (Key Stage 3<sup>6</sup> core curriculum English, mathematics and science).

Both the 2012 DfE<sup>7</sup> statement on EAL, and new Teacher Standards<sup>8</sup> confirm

*...a mainstreamed approach;... with English as the medium of instruction ‘to promote rapid language acquisition and include them (children learning EAL) in mainstream education as quickly as possible.*

They suggest that teachers need to have ‘a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils, including those with ... English as an additional language.’

If EAL learners are to gain the fluency that they need in the spoken and written language of the academic curriculum to progress and achieve in school in line with their English speaking peers, the primary responsibility for their language development has to lie with mainstream class and subject teachers. EAL specialist teachers therefore have a key role in supporting their mainstream colleagues in meeting needs of EAL learners in their classes by working alongside them in lessons to make the curriculum accessible to students, providing advice and support on teaching, learning assessment and resources and through the provision of staff development sessions and activities.

## Meeting the needs of newly-arrived EAL learners

In 2007, National Strategies guidance in the New Arrivals Excellence Programme (NAEP), advised teachers that support for learners of EAL, including those who are newly-arrived is best offered in mainstream classrooms where learners have access to their English speaking peer group and the curriculum.

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<sup>5</sup> Key Stage 1 is the primary phase of schooling for pupils aged 5 to 7 and Key Stage 2 is the primary phase of schooling for pupils aged 8–11.

<sup>6</sup> Key Stage 3 is the secondary phase of schooling for pupils aged 11–14.

<sup>7</sup> Department for Education, England

<sup>8</sup> Teachers’ Standards in England May 2012, Department for Education

‘Research has shown that high cognitive challenge and an age-appropriate curriculum are crucial to all EAL learners. Therefore, the most appropriate place for children ... new to English is in an age-appropriate classroom with their peers.’<sup>9</sup>

In the absence of clear national guidelines on the distinctive curriculum entitlement of newly-arrived EAL students, EAL induction support for students has tended to be offered on an ad hoc basis as needs arise. With decisions about how to address student needs and what to teach largely left to individual EAL teachers, EAL induction therefore varies from school to school in its content and organisation. As a result, across the country provision and practice for EAL learners who are beginners to English are uneven.

For older pupils arriving at the end of primary schooling or in secondary schools with little previous education it is now accepted that ‘...a very short small-group familiarisation programme of induction may be appropriate’ (*ibid*) providing such programmes are linked to the mainstream curriculum. In practice, this can prove impossible, given the breadth of the curriculum, numbers of students needing EAL support throughout the school and the fact that EAL teachers may be working with mixed aged groups that include EAL beginners with varying experiences of education and school, as well as those who may also have additional or special educational needs. Increasingly, the expectation is that EAL students in particular will remain in the mainstream classroom and be taught mostly by mainstream class or subject teachers so they do not miss out on curriculum learning.

*It is unlikely that newly-arrived ... children would need to be taught outside the classroom. Learning English through the curriculum provides a meaningful context for language acquisition. It also provides children, even those new to English, with the English that they need most, that which enables them to access the curriculum. The language that children new to English most require is the language being used within the classroom. It may even be possible to deliver an induction programme within the mainstream classroom during group work or independent work periods (ibid).*

However, this approach fails to take into account the significant gaps in mainstream teacher knowledge about how to develop EAL in the curriculum as evidenced in Teacher Development Agency (TDA) newly qualified teacher annual surveys and in the work of Cameron on gaps in the vocabulary of EAL learners (Cameron 2002).

## **The position for newly-arrived EAL students aged 14–16**

The options for newly-arrived EAL students in this age group are quite limited. Where students are successful in securing a school place, they may experience piecemeal support given that the main focus in this phase of schooling is on national GCSE examination courses and teaching.

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<sup>9</sup> National Strategies New Arrivals Excellence Programme Guidance 2007

If a school has an EAL teacher in post (many schools do not), students may be timetabled for induction support for part of the week with content most usually determined by the EAL teacher. The teacher may also negotiate places on a reduced number of GCSE option courses for each individual student, carefully selected to match the students' capabilities and interests. This is less likely to happen, however, if students join the school mid-year when groups are already in place and full.

Schools may be in a position to provide some in-class support for students in mainstream classes provided by either EAL or SEN teachers or teacher assistants. Where the student has had little or no prior schooling in first language before coming to the UK, some literacy support may also be provided.

More recently, however, it has not been uncommon, for schools under pressure to maintain standards in academic subjects, to refuse permission for EAL and SEN staff to withdraw students from mainstream subject teaching for additional language or learning support, even when the students are new to English and unable to engage with the subject lesson. In these cases, direct EAL support for new arrivals will be occurring in snatched moments throughout the day, either in break or lunch times, when students should be developing important relationships with their English speaking peer group to ensure they get access to good models of spoken English and develop their social skills, or after school when they may be tired and less likely to be able to concentrate on new learning. As an approach it shows a lack of understanding about the challenge and time it takes for students to learn to speak and use English as an additional language for academic purposes.

For EAL teachers too, who since the mid 1980s have worked hard to bring quality whole-school approaches to EAL teaching and learning to reflect cross-curricular language development needs, and to gain professional equality with their mainstream colleagues (in the eyes of pupils as well and those in leadership and policy roles), this approach is a backward step. It marginalises the work they do by not providing key curriculum time for EAL work with students. It also fails to recognise the key staff development role that EAL teachers need to have if they are to disseminate their knowledge and expertise across the school so that mainstream teachers can meet the responsibilities they have in developing the language of EAL learners in the curriculum, including beginners.

In other school contexts, students aged 15 or 16 who manage to get a school place, may find themselves timetabled for a one-year EFL 'type' of course or be placed on non-academic accredited courses (for example a BTEC<sup>10</sup> in Science or ICT). For those students who are not successful in finding a school place, the situation is likely to be even more difficult as they bypass the school system altogether and are referred directly to adult ESOL provision in a local further education college.

Research into second language development in a school context (Collier 2007) recognises that for students to be successful in their academic achievement, they need to learn English at the same time as they progress through the mainstream curriculum. However, in both a school and a college context, where students

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<sup>10</sup> Business and Technology Education Council – qualificatory body for courses in schools and colleges in the UK

14–16 are enrolled on courses that assume that their primary need is to learn English before they can move onto academic or vocational courses, they are likely to experience difficulties.

As part of the development of EAL curriculum courses, I conducted interviews with a group of EAL students. Within the group were students who had attended courses in school and others who had been referred to ESOL provision in a local college. Although the students in school reported back that they felt they received better pastoral support than those going to a further education college, all students who followed an English language only course rather than the usual mainstream school curriculum said that they felt they had lost valuable time studying subjects that did not lead to qualifications that would help them to progress through the school or college system. Many of the students placed on entry level ESOL courses in colleges, admitted they had dropped out of the course quite quickly when it became clear that the college would not consider admitting them onto academic courses until they reached at least ESOL Level 1. Those in school were also disappointed when they discovered that courses they had followed for one year did not automatically create a pathway for them to stay on at school the following year to start GCSE or A/S level courses and other essential qualifications so that they could progress to university.

## **The challenges for teachers**

To address challenges for mainstream teachers in meeting the needs of EAL learners 14–16 in their classes, and for the students in learning academic English whilst also learning through the medium of English, I started to develop a range of EAL courses and curriculum options. My aim was to develop new and more relevant curriculum pathways for EAL students that would build on their prior knowledge and experience and facilitate their knowledge-transfer (i.e. learning from EAL specific courses and programmes to mainstream teaching and learning and back). Most significantly, I hoped that if this could be achieved, teachers would be able to develop the knowledge and skills they needed to teach an increasingly diverse student population more effectively.

In designing the courses I drew on content-language integrated teaching approaches in the US, Canada and Australia. Content-language integration, defined as teaching and learning subject content and English language at the same time, remains an undeveloped area in most EAL professional training to date. The body of work on content-language integrated EAL teaching pays particular attention to teaching and learning subject content and English language at the same time and differs from that of content-language integrated learning (CLIL) that aims to teach a modern foreign language through its use in classroom communication. Of particular interest, was the work of Short (1999) and others on ‘sheltered instruction ESL programs’, which were designed to give more recently arrived English language learners ‘a jump-start on the required subject matter’ they need for examinations whilst enabling them ‘to systematically develop English language skills’. This seemed to offer models for developing distinctive curriculum pathways for EAL learners from diverse language and educational backgrounds in the UK and was therefore worth exploring.

My first priority was to give consideration to the unmet needs of EAL students of statutory school age whether in or out of a school setting. With flexibility already built into the Key Stage 4 curriculum and EAL learner needs prioritised for three years of 14–19 funding, there was an opportunity to develop for the first time dedicated EAL curriculum courses and pathways. There was also an opportunity to pool staffing and school resources from across the borough to make shared curriculum provision for a wider group of EAL learners, including those in schools without dedicated EAL teaching staff or attending courses in local colleges but wanting to follow a school curriculum.

## **New EAL content-language curriculum courses and principles for practice**

New courses and materials had to be designed to meet the particular needs of EAL students and provide a mechanism for them to move between bespoke EAL course provision and the mainstream curriculum. To achieve this, courses and materials would need to develop students' language, literacy and learning in ways that would help them to make connections with content learning across the curriculum. My hope, however, was that the courses and materials would also serve as useful tools for developing the practice of teachers. If successful, the prototype content-language EAL pedagogy in courses could equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of a diverse student population in both mainstream and small group contexts.

In content-language EAL courses and materials the content is tailored to the needs of students (age and subject appropriate) and therefore of direct relevance, there is a strong focus on visual material including 'graphic organisers' (Mohan 1990) to help students make meaning and connections across the curriculum and language development and teaching strategies are organised around real texts and tasks that are used in curriculum subject teaching.

In teaching, therefore, language development is not solely defined by improvements in grammar and vocabulary, rather students' progression in English is seen in terms of their increasing capacity to use English for learning purposes in ways that are appropriate and sensitive to the prevailing school conventions and established curriculum genres.

A range of curriculum initiatives sharing these characteristics were identified for development for a UK context, taking account of the way in which our schools organise learning to meet curriculum requirements and address the needs of a highly diverse EAL learner population in the mainstream.

- **Bespoke courses for EAL new arrivals** – a ten-day programme for inducting new arrivals in lower and upper secondary schools and a one or two year GCSE option course (level 2 course) for students with little prior schooling in first language or experience of the curriculum.
- **Inclusive academic language and literacy teaching through more challenging topics in mainstream subjects** – curriculum units of work for all learners following level 2 GCSE courses in Key Stage 4 e.g. 'interpreting data', 'probability'

or ‘word problems’ in mathematics, or ‘forces’ in science, as a template for developing similar units of work for other curricular areas.

- **A locally-based ‘extra-curricular programme’ to support English language and literacies for academic purposes** as an extension of the DfES<sup>11</sup> funded Widening Participation Programme being offered through higher education institutions – for students from multi-ethnic, multilingual backgrounds needing support in meeting the academic language and literacy demands of A/S and A level (level 3) courses and wishing to move onto university courses.

In all courses and materials, language development and academic development would be viewed as interdependent entities (Collier and Thomas 2007)<sup>12</sup>. A key focus in teaching would be on the cross-curricular language and literacy that students needed to achieve academically. As with the thematic approach to ‘content’, language and literacy would also be organised thematically around the key concepts<sup>13</sup> of:

- **written and spoken genre** – accepted and predictable ways of using spoken or written language texts to perform particular tasks, for example, presenting an argument for and against, giving instructions.
- **subject-specific registers** – appropriate spoken or written language forms for different curriculum subjects and purposes, for example formal presentation or written text for examination purposes, answers to mathematical problems, informal dialogue for drama lesson.
- **multimodality** – the different ways in which meaning can be communicated, for example signs and symbols, verbal and non-verbal communication.

Lessons would start with, and build on, students’ knowledge and resources in first language and their stage of English language and literacy development and content would be organised around teaching topics determined by the needs of learners at different stages of their EAL development and school experience.

Teaching strategies, known to promote the development of oracy and student independence, for example collaborative group work, presentation skills and the use of technology would also be integrated throughout.

## **Integrating content and language for teaching newly-arrived EAL learners**

In this section I will describe one of the bespoke courses that was developed for EAL learners to show how content-language integration works in practice.

The EAL GCSE option course<sup>14</sup> was developed to create an opportunity for EAL students at early stages of learning English to engage with GCSE level study.

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<sup>11</sup> Department for Education and Skills (now Department for Education).

<sup>12</sup> Collier, C (2007) The Assessment of Language Acquisition. *Handbook for Second Language Acquisition* 166, 228

<sup>13</sup> Concepts of genre, register and multimodality drawn from the work of Halliday as represented in the South Australia Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework (2000).

<sup>14</sup> English Language and Literacy in Curriculum Learning (2006) Language Development Service Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea – for enquiries about this course and other content-language materials please contact Sara Green sara3L@hotmail.co.uk



For teachers, the course provides a content-language curriculum framework that is intended to provide flexibility and inspiration for teaching in different school contexts to meet the particular needs of EAL students in their classes. Suggested activities provide a useful model for developing content-language integrated teaching aims.

Teaching in the EAL GCSE option course is organised around two broad themes that are central to students' academic success and personal development in the school environment: *Negotiating Social Relations in School* and *Finding and Using Curriculum Information*. Each theme is divided into topic areas that have their own teaching focus and aims and objectives for students at three different (early stage) levels of EAL development<sup>14</sup>.

These are exemplified by a selection of suggested class activities to guide teachers in their development of lessons and schemes of work for teaching the course in their own school context. There are also extension activities for students for each topic area at the end of the thematic section.

In *Negotiating Social Relations in School*, students learn to become familiar with social practices and conventions in a school setting. Through such topics as 'getting on with others', 'asking for help', 'living with authority' and 'meeting school expectations', students develop the language, interpersonal skills and understanding they need to forge positive relationships and to become confident and contributing members of the school community.

In *Finding and Using Curriculum Information*, students learn to become familiar with school literacy practices and conventions and develop personal study skills. Topics explored support students in becoming more confident and independent in their learning. They learn to carry out research using different sources of information, for example in libraries, the media and on the internet, and then how to write for academic purposes. In the final part of the course, students develop the skills to evaluate their own and others' work as well as sources of information they use.

The curriculum framework includes both aims and objectives for students and suggested teaching activities. There is explicit reference made to the language and literacy being developed in each section and throughout the course it is integrated with the content. This serves to support EAL teachers in planning and develops their own practice in content-language integration so they can use the approach more widely in their work with targeted groups of EAL learners and when working alongside other teachers across the school.

The language and literacy elements running through the course are colour-coded:

- Purple is used to denote how knowledge of subject specific **register** is being developed, for example for students in the new to English language literacy and learning (ELLL) group descriptions of school leadership roles and responsibilities using simple sentence structures 'x is responsible for ... x can be contacted at ...'

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<sup>14</sup> Teaching is aimed at students at three levels of English Language Literacy and Learning. New to ELLL, Exploring ELLL and Consolidating ELLL. In National Qualification terms these correlate very loosely to Entry Levels 1 and 2 (New to ELLL), Entry Level 3 (Exploring ELLL) and Level 1 (Consolidating ELLL).

while students in the Exploring ELLL group develop understanding of the concept of authority by describing a headteacher's job and relationship to students, parents and local authority.

- Red is used to denote how knowledge of **multimodality** is being developed, for example students at all levels of ELLL use a web-based bilingual dictionary to translate key vocabulary where they are able to do so and transfer their observations onto a picture storyboard to demonstrate their understanding.
- Blue is used to denote how teaching aims to build on students' own **language and cultural knowledge/resources**, for example students at all levels draw on what they know already about the position of teachers in different societies and make comparisons. They consider what might happen if there are no rules in school.
- Green is used to denote how knowledge of **genre** of spoken and written text is being developed, for example students in both the Exploring and Consolidating ELLL groups consider the role of authority in school. They practise formulating interview questions for conducting interviews with people in authority positions and prepare presentations showing what they have learnt.
- Black is used to denote how **language functions** and thinking skills are being developed, for example students in the Consolidating ELLL group gather information (selecting and rejecting) for a class presentation or display. They predict what will happen if there are no rules in school and give possible reasons for breakdowns in rule-governed behaviour).

In training, teachers consider how the principles of content-language integration have been applied in curriculum courses for working with EAL learners in schools. They also consider the potential of content-language integration for teaching and learning EAL in mainstream curriculum subject areas and therefore its role in developing the practice of all teachers so they can meet the academic language and literacy needs of all learners more effectively.

## Concluding thoughts

There are very few qualified specialist EAL teachers in schools in the UK, due to the long-term lack of systematic training in EAL for teachers joining the profession and the fact there is no requirement for teachers wishing to specialise in this field to gain a post-graduate qualification.

If EAL learners are to gain the fluency that they need in the spoken and written language of the academic curriculum to progress and achieve in school in line with their English speaking peers, there is a need for all teachers to know about how to support them. One way for teachers to achieve this would be through a content-language integrated teaching approach.

Content-language integrated EAL courses developed for students aged 14–16 in UK schools have been welcomed by EAL teachers across the country for their robust theoretical underpinning and for their flexibility. Following dissemination of EAL courses nationally, many EAL teachers have adopted them in their schools and, as a result, a content-language integrated approach in their own teaching practice. As a model content-language integration in EAL courses is easily adapted

for mainstream planning and teaching purposes. The extent to which EAL teachers in these schools have been able to develop the approach more widely for use by mainstream colleagues in their teaching therefore needs to be explored.

The experience of developing content-language integrated courses confirm that this approach is possible for teachers working in ethno-linguistically diverse classrooms in UK schools. To be successful, however, it requires specialist knowledge and dedicated curriculum provision with a supporting professional development programme for teachers not familiar with this approach. In the context of significant cuts to funding in the public sector, fewer specialist EAL staff in post to support mainstream teachers and widening gaps in teacher knowledge and expertise due to the long-term lack of systematic training in EAL in the UK for many years, this may be critical for ensuring equality in educational outcomes for EAL learners in schools.

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**Creative ESOL:  
the power of  
participatory arts in  
language acquisition**

# 7

## Creative ESOL: the power of participatory arts in language acquisition

Eleanor Cocks and Theah Dix

*Here it's like having fun with everyone around you and listening to how good you are.*

Gloria

*It's good because we learn and have fun ... we learn with the game ...  
in school if you say something wrong they laugh ... here, if someone says  
the wrong word, you can go and help them*

Luccas

### Introduction

Gloria and Luccas are participants in 'Creative ESOL', a pioneering programme for newly arrived young migrants and refugees, aged 11 to 16, to improve their English language skills through drama and the arts. As co-facilitators of the programme, we are writing this paper from an English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) perspective, although the teaching of English with our learners is generally termed English as an additional language (EAL) due to their age range. This is because our English language teaching experience and training is predominantly with ESOL learners aged 16 and above. We are also viewing the model through the lens of applied theatre, a relatively new field of practice, which can be loosely defined as the use of drama for personal or social change. This draws on our wealth of experience as participatory arts practitioners.

The Creative ESOL programme is delivered in an inner city area by Rewrite, a grassroots participatory arts charity ([www.rewrite.org](http://www.rewrite.org)). The project aims to support young learners in relation to their personal and social needs and provide access to the arts as well as developing English language skills. Participants are referred by local secondary schools and voluntarily attend after-school sessions in a community workshop space, for ten weeks each academic term. We aim to have a maximum of 15 participants, who generally remain in the group for a year. The Creative ESOL model involves a qualified ESOL teacher and experienced drama practitioner planning, delivering and evaluating the sessions collaboratively, supported by a volunteer and peer mentor. Every term includes a guest artist session, a trip to an arts event and an end of term 'sharing' for an invited audience. We will be using one term of work in the programme as a case study in order to illustrate our discussion.

During the case study term, we were highly over-subscribed with up to 24 young people participating in the sessions. The group was super-diverse and of mixed ability, including individuals with spiky profiles, low-level literacy skills and learning difficulties. As it was the first term of the academic year, most of the group were new participants who had been in the UK for a short period of time, some as unaccompanied minors. Due to language barriers and responsibilities at home they were finding it difficult to make friends or engage in extra-curricular activities at school, where most of them were experiencing some form of bullying or discrimination. Many of them were overwhelmed by the demands of the curriculum.

Mohammed told us,

*In school too much people are talking and if the teacher is speaking you can't understand anything ... I am confused because if they give you work there is no one to help you ... the people laugh at you and say you can't speak English.*

As a result, the majority of the group appeared to be vulnerable, introverted and anxious.

Creative ESOL is an evolving model that is responsive to the local context. However, it is underpinned by certain organising principles. We use a central creative stimulus as a basis for the curriculum and then consider the corresponding areas of language focus, in response to the group's interests and needs. In the case study term the stimulus was an imaginary island, which the group created and named 'ESOL Island'. The island became divided to generate a narrative and the learners devised different conclusions to the story.

This approach provides opportunities to elicit and consolidate target language areas, which are weaved throughout the creative activities in each class. Sessions begin with whole group warm-up and focus exercises, progressing into small group work and a sharing, followed by a whole-group closing activity. Within these exercises there are 'ritual' activities, which are repeated or adapted each week. We predominantly use theatre processes, but incorporate other art forms including creative writing and visual arts.

## **Language acquisition**

### **Play**

Through the warm-up games, participants engage in play and energetic physical activity. These exercises are generally loud, fast and exciting and always feature prominently in learner evaluation. Adrian told us, 'the best is the games we do here, we play with everyone'. However, games are not simply about having fun, as they can also be an excellent way of developing language skills within themselves. One example of this is the warm-up game, 'dragon's tail' which the participants particularly enjoyed playing during the ESOL Island term. In this game two teams sit back to back and pairs from opposing sides come and try to grab the dragon's tail (a scarf in the facilitator's hand) when their number is called. They then have to return to their seat with the scarf without being tagged in order to gain a point for their team. In this game, participants were developing their listening skills but we also found that unexpected language emerged as they playfully interacted with their opponents and

offered their team members encouragement and tactical advice. The confidence and determination to communicate from even the quietest members of the group surprised us and showed us that we had underestimated their English language ability. A visiting teacher from one of our referral schools commented on this by saying, 'It's amazing to see young people so totally immersed in language learning without even realising it.'

### **Relaxation**

Through play, we aim to transport participants into a state of relaxation so that effective learning can take place. This is particularly important for young people who need the opportunity to release tension built up over the school day and escape from concerns or issues that may be on their minds. The theme of relaxation is then carried through the session in the way that we approach all activities. The focus tends to be on natural and non-pressured language production and error-correction is only used in relation to targeted language points. In this way, learners are able to explore language freely rather than in a state of tension where they feel that everything they say is being monitored or assessed.

### **Engaging the body**

Just as relaxation is conducive to effective learning, engaging the body is also linked to mental processes. There can be a tendency to compartmentalise this area in education, for example through the idea of the 'kinaesthetic learning style' being appropriate for certain learners or incorporated in isolated activities. However, in our approach learners engage the body in diverse ways throughout the session. This seems to help all participants engage with the learning process, particularly those young people who find it harder to articulate themselves in English. For example in the ESOL Island term, participants first listened to their story and responded through physical action which then encouraged them to try narrating it themselves. Following this Mohammed, a participant who struggled with reading, volunteered to narrate part of the story in the sharing event at the end of term.

Through drama exercises, participants are prompted to use the body, gesture and facial expression as well as the spoken word, in order to communicate. This mirrors communication in the 'real world' and therefore gives participants the opportunity to explore language in a more authentic way. It can also aid the understanding of new vocabulary. For example, after the group had decided on the physical environment and inhabitants of ESOL Island and we had explored the corresponding vocabulary, participants were asked to embody the new words. They worked in small groups, using their bodies to create trees, mountains, dragons and so on. Activities that use the body as a starting point in this way make the model inclusive for all learners, enabling everyone to participate irrespective of their language level. Therefore, in the diverse use of the body through our workshops we see young people developing all of their communication skills, avoiding the problem: 'All the vocabulary and grammar was in our heads and not in our arms, mouths, eyes and feet' (Jensen and Hermer 1998: 178).

### **Imagination**

The imagination can be a powerful tool in relation to language acquisition (Kao and O'Neill 1998). In creating ESOL Island, young people entered into an imaginary world where their focus was on the story of a divided land and the people and



creatures who lived there. As a result, in improvisations and creative writing activities, participants' motivation was primarily to tell the story or express the experiences of the characters. We noticed how this seemed to enable them to talk and write in English with greater fluency and less inhibition, which relates to the notion that *'much first- and second-language learning is not intentional but incidental (i.e. while doing something else) and implicit (without awareness)'* (Liu 2002: 52).

Harnessing the young people's creativity and imaginations in this way also seems key to their level of engagement in the learning process. This was evident from the very beginning of the term, when participants eagerly contributed ideas to create a huge drawing of the island. In addition, operating in a dramatic world means that language can be put into context in order to aid understanding. For example in one session participants were struggling to understand the meaning of the word, 'generous', but after incorporating the word in different scenarios, it became clear.

### **Spontaneity**

In Creative ESOL sessions, participants are operating in a world of spontaneous action and speech, thereby replicating authentic communication processes. In a drama improvisation there is no pre-determined script and the performers have to act and react to each other in the moment. This means that, not only are they forced to really listen to each other, they are also encouraged to take risks with language. As Wagner, an advocate of language learning through theatre states, *'a language learner with an audience and a purpose is pressed to discover the words he needs to respond appropriately in the context of the drama'* (2002: 5). By 'audience' she means a subject to whom language is addressed and the 'purpose' relies on a commitment to the fictional world and characters within it. For example, in the ESOL Island term, one group of participants created a memorable scene where the children from one side of the divided island were desperately trying to persuade their parents to let them play with children from the opposing side. The young people created a convincing scene where the language they produced was much more sophisticated than we had anticipated. It seems likely that participants who begin to take risks with language in a learning environment in this way, will then have more confidence to do so in other contexts.

### **Emotion**

We have noted that when participants have an emotional investment in the drama they seem to engage with activities at a deeper level and have a greater motivation to communicate. This was key to the success of ESOL Island where participants became particularly engaged when conflict arose in the story and created emotional responses. This was apparent in the scene mentioned above where the children became frustrated with the stubbornness of their parents.

Writing activities also seem to take on a different dimension when participants have an emotional connection with the work. This is evidenced in exercises such as diary entries, exploring the inner thoughts and feelings of characters. During these activities, participants who are reluctant to write or have literacy issues often find a new enthusiasm for communicating through the written word and improve their fluency in this respect. In more general terms, just as the body is integral to

communication, so is emotion. Therefore, the Creative ESOL model aims to approach language learning in a holistic way, integrating body, thought and emotion.

### **Critical pedagogy**

In common with applied theatre practice, our approach to teaching is grounded in the area of critical pedagogy. This term originates from the work of Paulo Freire and refers to a learner-centred educational system, which challenges social injustice (Freire: 1970). Freire suggests that traditional teaching forms reinforce inequalities in wider society, thus disempowering the learner. He therefore advocates an approach to education which he termed 'co-intentional' in which students and teachers engage in dialogue with the intention of investigating themes as equals and creating new understandings of the world together.

We implement elements of critical pedagogy that are relevant to our context; for example, challenging the barriers between teacher and learner through operating in a fluid workshop space. In this environment there is no divide between 'teacher space' and 'learner area' as the room is owned and inhabited by everyone, in a constant state of flux. This is reflected in the fact that we do not use a whiteboard but write on big sheets of paper that can be moved around, shared and stuck on the walls as necessary. The adults participate in all games and activities with an equal sense of playfulness and many activities are done in a circle, affording everyone the same status.

We aim to reject the 'banking system' of education where the teacher is seen as someone who dispenses knowledge to the learners. Instead, everyone in the room is seen as having knowledge to share as reflected in Luccas' comment at the beginning of this chapter and Henry's feedback: *'If you have something that you don't understand you can ask the other person and he can help you'*. In one session, participants worked in small groups to brainstorm adjectives to describe ESOL Island, focusing on key features such as the river, mountains, dragon and people who lived there. They enjoyed spending time on this activity, sharing knowledge around new vocabulary and supporting each other with spelling whilst creating attractive displays. When participants presented their work to the whole group, we noticed how intently everyone listened and then gave spontaneous applause, validating the sense of participant as teacher.

In addition, our model draws on critical pedagogy in the way that the session content is determined. Freire discusses the importance of a curriculum that is directed by the learner rather than pre-determined or dictated by the teacher. Therefore, we use feedback from participants on their interests and language needs in order to decide on a creative arc for the term. Learners are then able to use this stimulus to explore the language that is relevant to them. We also use evaluation activities at the end of each session and term so that participants can reflect on the learning process. For example, during the ESOL Island term, we used a closing ritual activity called '*magic box*' which involved learners taking turns to articulate their responses to the session. As well as developing their critical engagement with learning we also noted the way in which some participants began to use this activity as a way of consolidating or experimenting with new language. One participant, Abou, began to list the new words

he had learned, having independently decided to use this activity as a marker of his developing language abilities. In moments such as these we have seen the way in which our methodology allows young people to become active agents in their own learning.

## Personal and social development

### Positive relationships

Creative ESOL combats isolation through bringing together young people from different schools, who have shared experiences. In evaluation activities, participants articulate the importance of making new friends within the group and in the magic box activity we often hear comments such as *'I enjoyed being here with everyone'* and *'I enjoyed playing with my friends'*. The use of play is an important factor in developing positive relationships within the group as the games develop trust and co-operation.

The fact that most of the session activities are collaborative and many are whole group exercises also seems to be valuable to participants, as reflected in Samira's comment: *'Here we are sitting together but in our school we are just sitting individually'* and Henry's reflection: *'Here we are all together...we are all learning together... we all work together'*. This sense of solidarity is perhaps reflected in the ESOL Island story, as all the conclusions the participants created involved the ESOL Island people being reunited. Henry's comment also supports our belief that developing a positive group dynamic is integral to a productive language-learning environment.

### Confidence

Using a drama-based model encourages learners who are often extremely introverted to develop their confidence through creative expression. We take a gentle approach in this respect, as we begin with ensemble exercises and then gradually encourage learners to 'perform' in front of each other. For example, one popular game we played in the ESOL Island term involved individuals standing in the middle of the circle and sharing an activity that they liked doing, through language and mime. During one session, whilst playing this game, Abou pronounced, 'I like flying in the sky', swooping through the space with his arms outstretched and a huge grin on his face. The other participants responded with laughter and applause. In this moment we saw evidence of an increase in Abou's confidence to speak English as well as take creative risk, which seems to enable participants to communicate more effectively in various settings. Henry's statement reflects this: *'I can communicate with other people who I don't know outside ... I think because of the confidence. When I used to not come here I didn't have as much confidence as I have now.'*

The use of critical pedagogy also appears to help learners become more assertive. For example, ESOL Island seemed to empower participants specifically because it was their own creation. Fatmata said, *'I enjoyed talking about our story'* and then emphasised, *'for us'*. We saw the effects of this process in various moments over the term, such as participants deciding to set up the space before the sessions and take responsibility for the refreshments, or Mohammed volunteering to stay behind after one session to contribute to evaluation and planning with the facilitators.

Participant feedback regarding the sharing events suggests that the opportunity to perform for an invited audience is also valuable in order to demand recognition. Vaneusa, a young person who was particularly introverted when she first joined the group, said that these events were important to her because, *'you can show the people what you can do'*, suggesting that this is an empowering process.

### **Cultural transition and identity**

Second language acquisition is intrinsically bound up with the construction of identity (Canagarajah 2004: 117) and we cannot ignore the challenges that young people are facing in relation to migration and cultural transition. This is particularly difficult for young adolescents negotiating their identities in a harsh inner-city environment. When creating characters, participants can explore and experiment with aspects of their own identity through a fictional persona. The creative framework provides participants with a safe, fictional world in which to work through their feelings about their new lives. For example, in ESOL Island we explored the issues of conflict and community through an imaginary land and people, ensuring that the creative world kept the subject matter at a safe distance from the young people's direct experience.

### **Challenges**

We have encountered various challenges in relation to the Creative ESOL programme. Some of these difficulties are common to most ESOL and EAL settings, such as managing super-diversity, mixed levels and spiky profiles, whereas others are specific to our innovative model of practice.

The first of these relates to 'the fixed and the free' (Johnstone 1998: 24); we sometimes find it difficult to strike a balance between structure and spontaneity. This manifests itself in the tension between our need to pre-plan but also make the curriculum responsive to the participants' needs and interests.

We also question the balance between fluency and accuracy, at times worrying that we do not do enough to consolidate target language. So for example, during ESOL Island we were able to explore past simple through the narrative but did not have time to do targeted activities on other past tenses that were inevitably elicited.

Using drama as a basis for our approach can be challenging for some participants. During the ESOL Island term, we had one participant who appeared to find it difficult to engage with performance-related activities due to cultural and faith issues. We also encountered young people who were unenthusiastic about drama but wanted to attend the sessions for the language and social aspects. For most individuals this changed over time but one participant remained very reluctant to participate in overt drama exercises. In cases such as these we try to find opportunities for young people to take on alternative roles. So for example, this participant took on the role of director for the end of term sharing. It is always difficult to assess how much of this reluctance is due to low confidence and therefore we have to strike a careful balance between challenging participants and allowing them to opt out where necessary.

In relation to our use of critical pedagogy, we have noticed that some participants reject the idea of a 'horizontal' relationship between teacher and student. For example, at the start of the ESOL Island term, participants insisted on leaving a gap in the circle next to the facilitators and resisted calling us by our first names, insisting on 'Miss'. Similarly, activities that we hoped would prompt critical reflection on the learning process were sometimes met with suspicion. In the early sessions, participant responses to the magic box activity were often simply '*I liked everything*' but as the term progressed they were able to evaluate specific aspects of the session, evidenced in Samira's comment: '*I enjoyed sitting in a circle and talking together*'.

Critical pedagogy also has a clear agenda for social change and as facilitators of the Creative ESOL project, we both have intentions for the project that go beyond simply learning a language. We clearly have a desire to empower young people, prompting questions around the idea of transformation. These questions are central to applied theatre practice and we realise we have to ask ourselves, '*If the motive is individual or personal transformation, is this something which is done to the participants, with them, or by them? Whose values and interest does the transformation serve*' (Nicholson 2005: 12). We therefore have to be honest about our aims for the project, consider how explicit these are and explore the possibilities for facilitators and participants to be co-authors of the project outcomes.

## Concluding thoughts

We are excited about the future of the programme. We know that the model can be used with diverse learners in a range of settings as we have delivered projects using a similar methodology for 16- to 19-year olds, adult learners and family learning contexts. We also see the model working effectively in early years and primary school settings. We have recently been extending our networks and knowledge in the ESOL field and are pleased to see some radical movements in this area. We see the potential for cross-pollination with projects such as 'Reflect ESOL', a pioneering approach to language learning rooted in critical pedagogy, incorporating visual tools to reflect on issues that learners are facing in their lives ([www.reflect-action.org](http://www.reflect-action.org)). We are also keen to work more closely with EAL professionals.

Our engagement with the Creative ESOL programme has had a defining impact on us as facilitators and we are extremely passionate about the project. We are determined to sustain and develop our provision. It is not always easy to articulate the success of the work as it is somewhat intangible and often relates to a fleeting moment that occurs inside the four walls of the workshop space. We often find ourselves leaving the sessions brimming with inspiration but struggle to fully explain what happened. However, when visitors participate in a workshop or sharing and experience the practice for themselves they often leave the space with similar enthusiasm. Despite our difficulty in defining or labelling the model, we know that it is in these small but powerful moments of human interaction that we see the embodiment of our intention to, '*approach learning not merely as the acquisitions of knowledge but as the production of cultural practices that offer students a sense of identity, place and hope*' (Giroux 1992: 256).

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# **Class blogging in ESOL**

# 8

## Class blogging in ESOL

Richard Gresswell and James Simpson

### Introduction

*Frehiwet lives in a city in the north of England and attends a local further education (FE) college where she is taking a full-time course in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) at entry level 2 (E2), i.e. beginner/pre-intermediate, level. She spends around 15 hours a week in classes with a group of other young adult learners aged between 16 and 19, and is in her second year of study. She came to the UK a year ago; she is originally from Eritrea but spent time in other countries before arriving in the UK. Like many of the other young adults in her class, Frehiwet came to the UK on her own and before she was 18. On account of her ‘unaccompanied minor’ status she receives support from the local city council asylum seeker and refugee team whose role it is to look after young people like Frehiwet, providing accommodation and social welfare support.*

In this chapter we meet Frehiwet and her colleagues in the class, and describe how their use of digital media enables them to overcome some of the literacy challenges they face. First we introduce an understanding of literacy which relates to the learning lives of these students and their use of digital media, both in the context of their English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) course and in their out-of-class lives. We then present a class blogging project carried out by students in this class with one of the authors of this chapter, Richard Gresswell, who was their tutor. In this part we examine a number of events which occurred during the blogging project, where students encountered, engaged with and used digital technology for productive learning experiences. Finally we suggest that the integration of new media into ESOL classroom practice entails a reconfiguration of roles: the teacher is no longer the sole source of content, and the students are able to shape their learning in ways which align closely with the needs of their daily lives.

### Relevant Themes

A number of key themes converge when we consider the use of digital technology in this class. The students are all young adults whose ability to develop literacy in English has been compromised by their disrupted education as children. This is clear when they are faced with traditional classroom texts. Yet new literacy technologies pervade their daily lives: they are adept at using mobile phones and social networking sites, which require mastery of quite complex devices and the ability to navigate online spaces.



## **Learners with disrupted formal education**

One thing this diverse group of young adult ESOL learners have in common is a disrupted formal education. This affects their current learning quite fundamentally. Firstly, their experience as children has limited their ability to read and write in their home languages, some of them to the extent that they cannot read and write at all in the language they grew up with. If a student does not develop a knowledge of text and writing systems as a child, they do not have that foundational knowledge to draw upon as an adult, which hinders their ability to develop as a reader and a writer in a new language. Many of the students in the E2 class are hence learning to read and write for the first time, as adults, and in a new language. Consequently, their English literacy development lags behind their oral development, which poses challenges to their inclusion in classroom and assessment practices where the use of print plays such a major role.

In day-to-day ESOL classroom practice activities in textbooks and worksheets, as well as newspaper articles, leaflets, maps and other printed 'realia' are commonplace. Such texts are also used in assessment practices, even those which ostensibly test oral communication. In this illustrative vignette we can see how limited access to written text impedes a student's progress through the institutional demands of a speaking assessment:

*It's May, and today Frehiwet has her speaking exam. She is resitting the exam, having failed the previous year. The examiner asks Frehiwet where she lives, to which she replies 'Marlborough Terrace'. The examiner asks her to spell that for him, as he must do according to his script. After this initial obstacle Frehiwet then goes on to answer a few questions about her life and interests. For the final task, the examiner produces a map and asks her to give him the directions to the supermarket. She moves her finger over the map. It is clear that she is struggling to make sense of the piece of laminated paper in front of her.*

This example illustrates how print manages to permeate even a test of oral communication. Frehiwet faces two literacy challenges in this speaking exam. She has to spell a name aloud, one whose orthographical representation bears little relation to its spoken form, (if only she lived on Park Road!). And she has to engage with a printed map. The assessment tasks implicate literacy just as much as oral communication. In Frehiwet's case, there is a misalignment between her literacy development and the nature and difficulty of the literacy-based task in the test. This being so, literacy, rather than oral competence, impinges on her ability to succeed in a speaking assessment, which in itself is an institutional barrier to progression in adult education.

## **Literacy**

Literacy, and its deficit and pejorative antonym illiteracy, relate closely to inclusion or exclusion in society, whether it be in education, employment or simply an individual's quality of life.

A common-sense and established definition of literacy is 'the ability to read and write'. Also well-established is the notion of literacy as a commodifiable skill, something one can have more or less of (i.e. with a rate or a level). This conception of literacy relates in turn to educational policies and practices, for instance assessment practices.

An assessment of literacy as a measurable skill will disadvantage those whose ability to read and write has been hindered by their lack of schooling and the migration process, as previously illustrated through Frehiwet's oral assessment.

An alternative, broader perspective on literacy is where it is understood as plural, socially-situated contextualised practices, as 'multiliteracies'. The focus here is on what people do with literacy, i.e. how they engage and interact with texts of one form or another, rather than on an individual's ability to read or write. As we will see, this view of literacy is pertinent when considering literacy in the digital age.

### **Multiliteracies**

*Ali is 16-years old. He has recently arrived in England, from Kashmir in Pakistan. He has never attended school. He speaks very little English. He is sitting in the computer room to begin a task on the class blog. The students are going to do some work on sharing music videos from YouTube and embedding them in the blog. Ali's mobile telephone makes a sound, the tutor reminds him that they are in the classroom now and to switch off the phone. He takes a look at his phone. It's a text message. The tutor asks him if everything is OK. He says it's just his dad telling him that he'll be picking him up from college after class. Ali returns to his work on the computer.*

In this short vignette we meet Ali, who certainly struggles with the day-to-day classroom texts of book, board and worksheets. Yet he manages extremely well a number of tasks around texts of different types. First he is already at the computer and has managed to log on with a username and password using the keyboard. Next, when his phone has alerted him he has navigated to the text messages, and he has read and understood the message. Ali has then been able to relate the message to the teacher. He is now about to visit *YouTube* to search for a video. In the space of minutes Ali has negotiated a number of different texts. He draws upon a repertoire of multiple literacy practices or multiliteracies that are available to him. This repertoire becomes visible when 'literacy' is broadened to incorporate other modes of communication, encompassing written text (for example the phone message) but also the icons on his phone's screen and the spoken practices (talk between Ali and his teacher) surrounding the use of the writing.

The ease with which many of the learners in this class are able to negotiate and manage digital texts is quite transparent. They use iphones and smart-phones in class, they contribute to the class blog and other related digital projects. An understanding of literacy as social practice enables one to see that what counts for students is what they do with texts, whether digital or not, in their everyday lives. Also visible is the contrast between their fluency in their everyday in-class and out-of-class practices and the challenges they face with formal classwork and assessment. Unfortunately for them, it is their success or otherwise in the latter which 'counts' institutionally and more broadly in society, for example when they are trying to gain employment or access to Higher Education. Access to these '*powerful literacies*' of the classroom and assessment is acknowledged as being essential. However at the same time we argue here that digital media such as blogs can help create new pedagogic spaces and 'ways in' for these young adult learners.

## Examples from practice: the E2 class blog – ‘ESOLphoto’

We now turn to a description of a class blogging project, where Richard Gresswell discusses his experiences using the blog with the E2 class.

I first became interested in blogging through various projects with young adult ESOL learners, and over a short time the potential benefits (and challenges) afforded by the use of blog media in the ESOL classroom became clearer to me.

A blog is a form of website whose main characteristic is that the most recent content published as ‘blog posts’ appear at the top of the front page of the site. This content is often organised through the use of tags or categories which are often displayed as tag or category clouds. Blog content may have varying degrees of interactivity determined by the blog author(s), for instance through enabling the use of comments or ‘follow’ and ‘like’ buttons on the blog. Blogs authors also commonly make use of a whole array of widgets usually found in the sidebars of blogs. These add desired extra functionality, for instance, images, maps, menus, chat tools etc. The possibilities are endless, which in itself presents a range of issues and challenges.

Blogging in classroom contexts demands lots of decisions to be made in relation to the functionality of the blog, and importantly how this impacts on security and privacy of use. In the case of a group or class blog, however, the tutor can act as the administrator, setting up the blog and deciding on what permissions to give the students access to, the privacy settings, the widgets required and so on. With the blog configured in an appropriate way the tutor can still hand over a certain amount of control to the students while maintaining a safe and productive blogging environment.

I had a number of free blogging platforms to choose from. Perhaps the top three for anybody interested in class blogging are Wordpress ([www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com)), Blogger ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)) and Edublogs ([www.edublogs.org](http://www.edublogs.org)). In the end I chose Blogger as, at the time, I personally had a limited knowledge of blogging and it offered the easiest way to construct a simple blog using a ready-made theme or template. I created the initial design layout and retained the administration rights for the blog, enabling me to back it up regularly online and not allow the students to make changes to the design. However, all the students were given posting rights, which meant that they could create and post their work to the blog and comment on each other’s work using the blog ‘comments’ feature.

The learners were also responsible for organising their own work using categories and tags as mentioned above. These tags and categories showed up as a tag cloud in the sidebar, so the students and I could access previous work easily. For example a student could categorise all their work with their name and a specific tag for each project. Thus Frehiwet might share a video on the blog from YouTube and categorise it as ‘Frehiwet’ and tagged as ‘music video’. As a class we decided that the blog would only be visible and accessible to the students themselves as some of the students were resistant to the idea that it would become a publicly-available document.

I set up one password for all the students in the class. Passwords often present an obstacle for ESOL students, as they do with many people, partly because they are

easily forgotten, and also because it is difficult for learners who struggle with reading and writing and who are not familiar with keyboards to type in a password when the letters typed do not appear on the screen. So I chose one memorable password, which also enabled learners to help each other log in. We named the blog ESOLphoto.

For the next two months the learners worked on a different project every Wednesday afternoon encompassing a wide range of activities such as creating a personal profile page, sharing music, writing food diaries, and carrying out a photography project. Much of the preparation for the class blog took place in and out of the classroom and away from the computers. The blog's themes aligned with possible assessment topics, for example 'healthy eating' and 'giving and asking for personal information'. In addition the learners were awarded college certificates in ESOL and digital design as acknowledgement of their participation in the class blogging project.

Now I draw on classroom experiences of the blogging project and the opportunities and issues that arose in the process.

### **Taking control**

*It's Monday afternoon in class and the learners are taking their first three hour lesson of the week. As usual I enquire about the learners' weekends. The responses are on the whole predictable and limited. I ask Frehiwet about her weekend. Frehiwet replies 'On Saturday I went shopping and on Sunday I went to church.'*

This was a typical response from Frehiwet, quite minimal despite my efforts to find different ways of eliciting details of weekend activities at the beginning of the college week. I had tried asking students to write down 'three things that you did on Saturday', which had been an unpopular activity and only slowed down the pace and flow of the lesson: a familiar situation to many teachers no doubt, especially when working with beginner learners where the students' home languages are not shared by the teacher. I suspected that my own particular understanding of 'I went to church' was not shared by Frehiwet.

*It's Wednesday afternoon and the students are in the computer room working on the class blog. This week they are working on a music-sharing project where they are searching for music videos they like on YouTube. They embed the videos into the class blog and write a few notes and talk about them in class.*

*Frehiwet is on YouTube. She finds a video and then signals to me to come over and watch it with her. She says to me 'this is my church'. The 10-minute video clip features a church service from the Ethiopian Orthodox church in the city which Frehiwet attends. There is a priest in the centre, holding a book and singing and dancing. The camera pans the scene; there are hundreds of others in the church singing and dancing too, including a group of girls and women wearing white robes and head scarves. Frehiwet explains, 'This is the gospel choir, we are singing gospel music, look here [pointing at the screen], this is me'. The other students take an interest in the conversation and gather round the computer. Some laugh, but most are fascinated by what they see.*

In this instance a mutual understanding of what 'church' means to Frehiwet was generated between the members of the classroom community. Through Frehiwet's

ability to navigate and use digital media she was able to convey that understanding. However, it is not merely a matter of Frehiwet's use of digital media; more significantly it's a case of the re-configuration of roles played out in class that allowed such an event to happen. Frehiwet was the teacher here and myself and the other students were the learners.

### **Multilingual resources**

In class it was very common for the learners to draw on their multilingual resources in developing their oral and written language in English. Ali and Nazar, for example, often talked in Urdu around texts they were writing as they developed them in English: Ali speaks Urdu, and often uses Urdu with the Afghani students in the class and Nazar is from Afghanistan. I was curious about the Afghanis' use of Urdu and asked them how they understand and used this language. They explained that they had mainly learnt Urdu from watching films in Urdu in Afghanistan. The young Afghanis seemed to consider their multilingualism unremarkable, but frequently intervened and helped out when Ali was finding things difficult to understand in class, especially when written text was involved.

*Ali is sitting at the computer and the learners are creating personal profiles using images and their own written texts. Ali is unable to write what he wants to say in his blog post. Nazar is sitting at the computer next to Ali, and he moves across to help out. They speak in Urdu and then between them they write out a text in English on the computer, they also use Google to find some images to illustrate the text. I come over and have a short conversation with the two of them. I read the text on the screen to Ali a couple of times. Ali then reads the text back to me. I correct as we go along, Ali then reads again, and so on.*

What happened here was not so different to what was happening in class, where Nazar helped Ali to create a text in English through the use of Urdu. However, in the case of the blog there were more resources at their disposal, especially with regard to the images that they used in illustrating the text. Moreover a new space opened up, first for the negotiation of a text between two learners and then the intervention of the teacher to make use of the text for further literacy work on reading. The creation of this text on screen now became a vehicle for integrated skills work, again with a re-configuration of roles played out in class, where learners adopted the role of teachers of other learners, with myself taking up a more of a facilitating, intermediary position.

### **Local knowledge**

In the ESOL classroom learners may often be asked to talk about where they come from, their traditions, festivals, food and so on. There are often cases where learners do not want to or are unable to talk about such things. These learners are living in the UK and even if they have only recently arrived in the country they are gaining local knowledge and experiences very quickly. In the class blog project, I wanted to draw on learners' lives in the UK, with the intention of building a greater understanding among the learners and between them and myself. To do this I used a participatory visual research method called 'Photovoice', where participants are loaned cameras to record aspects of their daily lives. The aims of this method are to

gain insider perspectives on the lives of the participants and also to raise awareness of possible issues of difficulty and develop strategies for change. The photographs in the language classroom can serve as a vehicle for speaking and writing, in this case through the class blog.

*I have loaned some cameras from the college to the students. Some of them have decided to use their own cameras or mobile phones. We are in the computer room and 'playing' with the cameras to get to know better how to use them. As an initial exercise I ask the students to go round the college and to come back with pictures of three things they like about the college and three things they don't. They come back later and the class practise downloading the pictures to the computer and then inserting them into a blog post where they also write about the pictures they have taken and why. Now they are to take the cameras away, take some pictures and to bring them back to class in two weeks.*

*The learners return to class with their pictures. Frehiwet has taken some pictures of a group of people at her church at a wedding where they are all wearing traditional costumes. Iqbal has taken some pictures of a day trip to Birmingham, while Carlos has taken some pictures at a family party he went to at the weekend. The students talk about the pictures with me and the other learners as they upload them to the computers and organise them on their hard drives. They then insert selected pictures into blog posts and write about them, either as past events or as descriptions of what they see in the pictures.*

Through this work the learners were able to connect their classroom learning to their outside lives to some extent. The images they took acted as vehicles for emergent language to work with in class. Again the content was decided upon by the students. The job for me as a teacher was to look for opportunities for using that content as a platform for language and literacy development: very much a case of handing over control to the students, and allowing them to say what they want to say and choose how they want to say it.

## Closing the gap

Earlier in this chapter we identified a gap between established and new literacy practices, and noted how the young adults in the E2 class are disadvantaged by their lack of access to more traditional practices. The discussion in this section summarises the main findings from the class blogging project and how the integration of digital technologies and media into the ESOL classroom can help to narrow that gap.

**New literacies involve a lot more than reading and writing.** From the beginning of this chapter we have taken a broad perspective on literacy, focusing on the way all kinds of texts are used, rather than a print-centric and decontextualised view of literacy equating to the learning of the reading and writing skills. Our multiliteracies perspective has made visible the diverse practices and skills the students in the E2 class have at their disposal and are able to bring into their classroom projects. These range from their abilities to navigate the web to the embedding of code and the tagging and categorising of content. We argue that new literacies can move from the periphery to play a more central role in ESOL.

**New literacies present a challenge to old ones.** The new literacy practices illustrated in this chapter offer new ways of doing things in the ESOL classroom, new ways in which to create texts while drawing on a wider range of resources to do so. Traditional classroom activities such as essay- and letter-writing are both subverted and extended when re-imagined through digital media. Blogs, through their reverse chronology and interactivity create opportunities for the production of dynamic responsive texts which align with the students' lives, learning and language development. Through this we may perhaps see new genres of classroom literacies emerging, new forms of text production that go beyond writing, incorporating the design and use of a whole range of resources. A major challenge that lies ahead, however, will be to find ways in which the development and use of these new emergent digital genres can be assessed as part of the ESOL curriculum.

**Building bridges between old and new.** ESOL learners are still assessed through the writing of essays, letters, reports and so on. If and when they move beyond ESOL, they find that such assessment strategies are commonplace in other areas of education. Therefore although new digital genres are emerging, students still need to be able to access the 'powerful literacies' visible in traditional assessment practices that are dominant across the educational strata. However, through exploiting the students' own abilities, resources, practices and knowledge, bridges can be built between the old and the new. One pertinent example which was illustrated earlier is that of Ali's creation of his personal profile. In this text he incorporated images as well as words, creating something that was richer in meaning than could have been created with pen and paper. Moreover the students were involved in making their own posters, diagrams, surveys, maps and so on through the blog. Such productive work, it can be argued, better enables learners to interpret the visual images (diagrams, maps etc.) that are common features of current ESOL assessment practices.

**Students are adept at new literacy practices using digital technology in the class.** While many of the learners in the group struggle with print literacies, their ease with new literacy practices through the use of new technologies becomes transparent. It is counter-productive to deny these learners the opportunities to make use of their digital abilities for their language and literacy development in class.

**Integrating blogs and other digital media into ESOL classroom pedagogy entails a reconfiguration of classroom roles.** Throughout this chapter in every example given there has been a significant change in the 'traditional' roles of learners and teachers with regard to the tasks carried out on the class blog. In all cases there has been a handing over of control to the learners and between the learners in what they are enabled and allowed to do. However, along with this partial relinquishing of control there are numerous decisions to be made by the tutor in managing the blog, tasks and group dynamics. Moreover there is always a concern to maintain strict levels of privacy and security. Not only that, there needs to be a realisation of what the learners are capable of, and in any such group it is likely that there will be a diverse range of skills and practices. The key to success in incorporating blogs and other digital media into ESOL is firstly to anticipate such changes in the group

dynamics, roles and relations in class, and secondly to work to harness collaboration amongst the classroom community. This can be achieved by considering the knowledge, skills and abilities of the students themselves, as well as those of the tutor, as resources.

## **Concluding thoughts**

We hope that this discussion has illustrated the opportunities and challenges raised by the use of blog media in the ESOL classroom. It is accepted that in ESOL and English language classrooms around the world, learners and tutors do not necessarily have such access to digital technologies. However, we maintain that a growing number of learners of English, as with young people everywhere, are becoming more adept with digital technologies, and that digital media such as blogs are becoming more relevant in language education as a whole. Hence there is a need for a discussion on how best to integrate digital technologies into ESOL and the wider world of English language teaching.

Throughout this chapter the argument has oriented towards the learners and their tutor rather than to the technology itself. As we have seen, the shift from the paper-based to the digital classroom brings about a whole range of opportunities and challenges for learners and tutors, along with many changes to the roles, relations and dynamics within the classroom community. Importantly while a gap is visible between the old and the new, it is one that can be bridged and the authors are optimistic about what new literacies can bring to ESOL. Nonetheless we also believe that it is incumbent on dominant and powerful literacies to recognise that the literacy landscape is changing fast. Assessment practices for example have to adapt to the shifting and dynamic nature of everyday literacies.



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**James Simpson** is a senior lecturer in the School of Education, University of Leeds, where he co-ordinates the MA TESOL programme. He has been researching the teaching of English to multilingual students since 2004. His other research interests include language learning with new technology in the developing world. He is the co-author of *ESOL: A Critical Guide* (OUP, 2008, with Melanie Cooke) and the editor of *The Routledge Handbook of Applied Linguistics* (2011).

# Providing emotional support to ESOL and EAL students

# 9

## Providing emotional support to ESOL and EAL students

Thomas L Lloyd

### Introduction

*No teacher, is not fireworks is rocket. In my country have many rockets. Every day, every night. Sometimes you can't sleep because rockets.*

As English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and English as an additional language (EAL) teachers we sometimes find ourselves in situations where our students are talking about experiences that are confined in our day-to-day lives to the television or cinema screen. An example of this is the quotation above from an ESOL student who was asked to draw pictures representing his life in a warm up activity for a new class on the first day of term. The task was to show their pictures to the rest of the group who then had to guess what the picture was and what it represented. The student in question drew a football, the flag of his country and what I initially thought were fireworks.

As those who work with migrants and refugees will be aware, issues around emotional health and well-being are experienced by many EAL and ESOL students (Ward 2007, Refugee Council 2009, 2010). In one study, 82 per cent of the participants in one study (Refugee Council 2005) self-declared a mental health issue, while 64 per cent of the same study stated that they had been the victims of torture. Given this background it is reasonable to ask when, and not if, an ESOL or EAL teacher will be confronted with a situation in which one of their students wishes to talk about their traumatic past, or an emotional difficulty which is present in their life today. This chapter addresses these issues beginning with a consideration of matters from our student's point of view.

### From the student's perspective

Given that empathy is an intrinsic part of providing any emotional support, an appropriate place to start is to consider what difficulties our students may be experiencing from their perspective, as well as how they might be viewed from the standpoint of a mental health practitioner. To begin with, as uncomfortable as it may be, we should be frank about what may have happened to our students prior to arriving in the UK. As alluded to in the introduction, there is a chance that some of our students may have been the victims of torture. But there are many other things that may have happened to them and events that they may have witnessed,

such as murder or extreme violence, in some cases the victims being family members (Refugee Council 2010). These are likely to have impacted on their mental health, most commonly in the form of post-traumatic stress. As well as leading to post-traumatic stress, the violence and intensity of these experiences can also make the recovery process lengthy and difficult. Two of the main obstacles to initiating the healing process and achieving any kind of closure are the student's unwillingness to seek any form of help or support in dealing with their emotional distress or even to talk about what has occurred.

Our sense of safety and reassurance occurs neurologically with a release of opiates, and in certain circumstances oxytocin, in the brain. When this system is activated we naturally feel safe and at ease. However, this process may occur less frequently or even not at all, with people who have been the victims of abuse or neglect in the past (Gilbert and Irons 2005, Gilbert and Procter 2006). How this may play out in the minds of our students is that, as they have lived under threat for such an extended period of time, the neurological systems which create a sense of ease are undeveloped to the extent that they are not strong enough to overpower the sense of threat. Another possibility is that experiencing feelings of safety or reassurance are so alien that they are mistrusted and rejected. The result of this is that some students may not seek our help, or may reject it when it is offered.

One of the underlying elements of post-traumatic stress, and one which is increasingly being taken into account by practising health care professionals, is that of shame. Studies have shown that shame is one of the most powerful instigators of stress in social interaction (Dickerson and Kemeny 2004) and moreover that it shares a fundamental connection with post-traumatic stress. Trauma is linked with an intense level of threat, possibly even the belief that the victim would not survive their ordeal. Shame also carries a sense of threat but to the psychological self rather than the physical, which is one of the suggested explanations why people who have been the victims of trauma often feel concomitant feelings of shame about what they have lived through. How this may manifest in our students is that they may be extremely unwilling to talk about what happened due to feelings of shame or humiliation, even if they are entirely blameless for what occurred.

A final point is that people who suffer from post-traumatic stress may experience flashbacks with the full emotional intensity as experienced at the time of trauma (Kaufman 1989). These flashbacks are thought to be related to the amygdala which is a primitive emotional memory structure usually held in check by the frontal cortex. However, intense flashbacks can override normative neurological functions and the flashback can be experienced outside of any temporal context or meaning. This is a very alarming experience for those who witness it as well as the person who experiences it and will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

## **Emotional difficulty in the classroom**

Having provided an overview of the issues that may be facing our students, the next step is to consider how these can manifest in the classroom. From personal experience and feedback from other teachers it seems that there are two ways in

which the emotional difficulties of our learners are brought to our attention: critical incidents and one-to-one disclosure.

Disclosure of a mental health issue from an individual student to their teacher is relatively straightforward. A student may approach their teacher at the end of a class, possibly on some other pretext, and inform the teacher that they are dealing with an emotional difficulty. How to provide support, and indeed whether one should, shall be discussed later in this chapter. Critical incidents, however, are unexpected, challenging and merit further analysis. Consider the following example:

*A teacher introduces the topic of family to a relatively low-level teenage group. After the initial vocabulary and spelling activities, the lesson adopts a more personal focus and students are encouraged to talk about their families. One of the students who is normally very outgoing and regularly contributes to class discussions becomes reticent and reluctant to work with her partner. The teacher notices this and does not nominate this student for group feedback after the discussion in pairs. However, while another student is talking to the group about their family, the student who seemed unsettled by the activity starts talking. There was no invitation to talk and she does not seem to be addressing anyone in particular. She speaks partly in her native language and partly in English. As she talks she becomes increasingly agitated and her voice rises to a crescendo. The events she is describing are of a brutal and merciless violence. Furthermore it is clear from what she is saying that she witnessed them first-hand and that she and her family were the victims. The students who are sitting adjacent begin to move away and some look to the teacher to intervene. The teacher asks the student to stop but she is unresponsive and seems oblivious to her immediate surroundings. The episode culminates in the student putting her head in her hands and crying uncontrollably. The teacher takes an early break and sends the rest of the students outside the classroom in order to comfort the student and see if any emotional support can be provided.*

The first point to note is that critical incidents require a teacher to think on their feet. Secondly, as well as addressing the needs of the student at the time, given their capricious nature, critical incidents invariably occur in full view of the rest of the class. Therefore we should be sensitive to the fact that other students have witnessed what has occurred and following this a student may need reassurance from their peer group as much as their teacher. It is easy to see how disclosure in front of a group can create feelings of shame for the student in question, particularly with younger learners. A certain diligence may therefore be required of the teacher in the weeks and months following any disclosure to ensure that the group dynamic is still present, and that no rejection of the individual student has occurred.

## **Providing emotional support to our learners**

Whilst it is true that the principal efforts of supporting emotional wellbeing should be provided by trained professionals, finding the right support for our students and their specific needs can be problematic (Roberts et al 2004, Bayham et al 2007). If your student has approached you to talk about their emotional difficulties, it is a significant indication that they trust you and are hopeful that you can help in some way.

Therefore, even if you are fortunate enough to be able to refer the student to a specialist service, taking the time to talk to the student about the issues they are facing can have an immensely beneficial effect. Moreover, as many teachers do not have access to these services, it may be that your only option is to spend some time talking to the student yourself. In any case, if you decide to give your time to support a student who is experiencing emotional difficulty, the following points may provide some broad guidelines on how to proceed.

## **Create the right situation for the student to talk**

It is acknowledged that in general ESOL teachers attempt to create a safe and supportive learning environment (Mallows 2006). However, when we are offering emotional support to a student in need, there is an even greater emphasis on putting the student at ease and making them feel comfortable. We need to consider who should be present when discussing emotional difficulty. It is rare that people feel comfortable talking about these issues in front of other people, unless it is a support group specifically designed for that purpose, so being one-to-one with the student is preferable. The only caveat to this approach is if you are working with younger learners and are obliged to work with any restrictions your institution has about being alone with a pupil.

## **Listen**

Considered as one of the foundation skills of counselling (Culley and Bond 2004), the seemingly simple ability to listen can be deceptively complex. The first step in effective listening is to listen non-judgementally. People who feel they are being judged, even if they are the victim of circumstance rather than the cause, are unlikely to disclose fully what has happened to them and how they feel about it. Once we have developed the skill of listening without judgement we can begin to engage in 'active listening'. This means communicating that you have understood what your student has said, feeding back what you have been told and asking open-ended questions where appropriate. Communicating your understanding will give the student the confidence that they are being heard. Feeding back allows the student to be clear about what they have said, which can be as helpful to their understanding as much as yours, and asking open-ended questions helps the student not to get stuck during the disclosure.

## **Concentrate on the feelings not the story**

This will apply in particular to students who are talking about events in the past. One way of looking at a previous experience is to divide it into what happened and how one feels about it. While a certain amount of factual information will be necessary to understand the events as occurred, what is essential in resolving the emotional distress is isolating the emotions the student is experiencing and talking about them rather than the story itself.

The story is the account of who did what to whom; a cavalcade of victims and perpetrators. By its very nature, it assigns blame and concomitant feelings of guilt or resentment. Such sentiments entangle one's thinking with the past to the point where moving on becomes difficult or impossible. By concentrating on the feelings, we allow the student the freedom to revisit the traumatic event they experienced

in the past or face the emotional difficulty they are experiencing now without any further burden of guilt or resentment. Creating this acceptance is the only way that we are able to begin letting go of the past in any meaningful way.

## Challenges to supporting students

Given that teachers often feature at the top of many work-related stress surveys, you are more likely than not to be spending most of your day working under pressure. This makes giving a student the appropriate time and space to talk about emotional difficulty a challenge, one which you may feel you simply do not have time to address. What I can say from my own experience is that whatever sacrifices I have made in terms of time or effort have been reciprocated in many ways, all of which have had an immensely positive effect on my working life. From an improvement in my relationships with individual students and groups of students, to how I feel about my job and the difference I make in people's lives. So, it is with no hesitation that I suggest helping students in need is worth any extra time spent outside your regular teaching hours. But, this is of course an individual choice.

Another obstacle cited by many teachers to providing emotional support is the fact that we are generally not trained to deal with these kinds of situations. Researching this chapter has brought me into contact with several mental health professionals with experience in promoting mental and emotional wellbeing with refugee communities. During our discussions two points became clear that I found comforting and a validation of the support I have provided in the past. Firstly, that individuals with a great deal more experience than me believe that they will never have enough training and still need more. Secondly, that many aspects of good counselling rely on compassionate intuition as much as training or techniques. It seems that such instincts, accessible without any training, are as important as any formal instruction. Given this, I would hope that any reader of this chapter would feel that they are in a position to at least try to offer their support to a student in emotional distress.

Another point of relevance which emerged through discussions with mental healthcare professionals in researching this chapter is the importance of having or creating a support network. In all training programmes for psychotherapy practitioners, including voluntary organisations such as the Samaritans, regular feedback and monitoring sessions are incorporated to allow the trainee or practitioner to 'offload' if what they have talked about has been emotionally challenging. Even the most experienced practitioners in this field will have regular debriefing sessions with supervisors which allow them to process what they have been told without carrying forward any emotional baggage, and it is strongly recommended that teachers who offer emotional support to their students have access to a similar support network.

Unlike professional counsellors and clinical psychiatrists, however, we are unlikely to have timetabled access to mental health professionals who can provide the kind of support needed following any disclosure which we have found unsettling. If you are one of the lucky few who works in a forward-thinking organisation where this support for staff is provided, then my suggestion is to use it as much as is necessary. On the other hand, if you find yourself in the larger demographic of teachers whose

employers do not provide this service, the suggestion is to create this support network if possible. While the task of doing so will differ depending on the institution or individual, there are some general points to consider.

Firstly, if your place of employment offers some form of counselling service for students there may be some support for teachers too. Looking outside your place of employment, if you are referring a student to an external counselling service they may request some background information, which can also be an opportunity for you to talk to a healthcare professional if your student has told you anything you find difficult or uncomfortable.

Secondly, if your place of employment does not provide any counselling service or you are unable to talk to anyone externally, one possibility is to discuss these issues with a manager or a colleague with whom you feel comfortable talking. Something to consider in this approach, however, is discussing the details of what you have been told without betraying the confidence of your student, especially when talking to someone who may know the student in question. In this sense, seeking support as well as providing it follows the same method of talking about feelings rather than facts. Indeed, is there any need to go over the details of what your student has told you? After all, if you are seeking emotional support it is your feelings and reaction that matters, not the specifics of whatever it is you may have been told.

*During a tutorial, a student told me something which has affected me and now I am feeling...*

Is a possible approach which avoids any further disclosure and concentrates on your feelings, not the details of the story.

Finally, if there is no one at work you can turn to then you may want to consider talking to a friend or family member about how you are feeling. Their being removed from the situation and knowing you better than your work colleagues could even make them your first point of call to discuss an emotional issue. However, any confidentiality issues would still be relevant and so talking to them in the manner outlined above will ensure you get the support you need without breaking the student's confidence.

## **Younger learners**

While many of the issues and techniques discussed in this chapter are equally applicable to language learners of all ages, there are certain considerations which set apart younger learners in primary or secondary educational settings. Perhaps the first difference in these environments occurs before any interaction between the pupil and teacher, in that secondary schools, and to a lesser extent primary schools, tend to record and maintain more accurate and detailed records of student backgrounds than further education colleges or similar post-16 educational institutions. The advantage of this is that a teacher may have access to a lot more information about their students, which in turn could mean that the teacher is forewarned of any emotional health issues rather than having to wait to be approached by the student, or for a critical incident to occur during class.



Whilst having the information beforehand is an advantage it should also be noted that it needs to be accurate, which relies on the special or additional learning needs department of the school, and that the teacher has to take the time to read it.

Leaving aside the differences in record keeping, what seems to be the greatest challenge to young refugee and migrant students is the higher occurrence of alienation and bullying. A recent study conducted by the Refugee Council in secondary schools in the UK showed that the most common complaint made by refugee pupils and their families was of bullying and discrimination, to the point that many pupils were afraid to reveal their background or talk about their past (Refugee Council, 2008). Given this, it may be that the most immediate concerns for refugee and migrant children, is 'fitting in' and any emotional difficulty they are facing could be related to this, rather than events which have occurred in their country of origin.

Finally, as revealed in one of the interviews in the aforementioned study, it may be that concern about emotional distress in the family should not be solely limited to the pupil:

*One young lady's Mum cried on my shoulder at parents' evening, consultation day, saying she didn't see what was the point of getting up in the morning ... has terrible depression according to the daughter. And I invited the Mum to come and take part in projects in school. She didn't come. And that's where that situation is now. I feel I haven't catered for that Mum. She's a young Mum, late twenties, in a new culture, new place, in need. And I ask myself, who is catering for her needs? (Refugee Council 2008: 27)*

Despite bullying and discrimination, attending school provides some purpose and structure in the pupil's life that may not be present in their parents' or carer's. So it may be the case that there is a greater degree of emotional distress with the pupil's parents or carers than with the pupils themselves, which in turn could provide further distress for the pupil. As is clear from the above quotation, this is certainly not an easy situation for a teacher to deal with. However, it does not change the fact that being aware of all the factors which may be causing a student emotional distress is vital in providing the best possible support, even if some of the issues are beyond our control or influence.

## **Exemplary practice in providing support**

Researching this chapter has brought me into contact with other teachers as well as mental healthcare professionals. Some of these educators have been extremely innovative in their approach to supporting their learners' emotional needs. There is one example which I believe should be shared with a wider audience.

This initiative took place in a further education college in London. As well as academic teachers, who are responsible for teaching English, the college has group tutors for all students who are 16- to 19-years old. The group tutors are responsible for monitoring attendance, organising excursions and looking after the students' emotional wellbeing. Whilst checking the attendance of four students from different classes who were having similar behaviour and attendance issues, one of the group tutors noticed two striking similarities in their backgrounds. The first was that they all came from the same region of the same country and spoke the same dialect.

The second was that they had previously stated they were the victims of traumatic experiences in their countries of origin, or that there was a strong indication this had occurred even if the student had not mentioned it.

In order to bring these learners back on track in terms of behaviour and attendance, the group tutor decided to try a new approach based on the tenets of group therapy. With the co-operation of the department managers, the four students were excused from their Friday afternoon lessons and invited to a separate classroom where they were met by the group tutor and the college counsellor. Over the course of the next few months, the students were encouraged to talk about their experiences within the surroundings of this supportive environment, namely the support of their tutor, the college counsellor and their fellow students. Indeed, involving other students who had a great deal of understanding and empathy for one another was probably the catalyst of this initiative's success. By the end of the academic year, there was a significant improvement in the behaviour and attendance of the participants and all but one enrolled to continue their studies the following year. This example is evidence that thinking outside the box in order to alleviate the suffering of our students can also lead to an improved academic performance, both in terms of attendance as well as behaviour.

## Concluding thoughts

I believe that providing our learners with emotional support is worthwhile and can be attempted by any teacher who is concerned about the wellbeing of their students. Those who choose to provide this support should ensure that they have access to a similar support network so that they are better placed to support other learners in the long term. Finally, teachers who show real initiative in relation to providing emotional support can have a positive impact on their learners' academic performance, as well as a transformational effect on their lives.

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**Thomas L Lloyd** has been involved with EFL and ESOL teaching for over ten years. Volunteering for a rural development charity in India in 2007 had a profound effect on his world view and initiated his involvement in charitable work. On his return to the UK he became a volunteer 'listener' for the Samaritans and thereafter possessed the skills as well as the willingness to offer emotional support to students, which the ensuing years provided many opportunities to do so. Whilst working at International House London, a piece of writing from a student which closely resembled a Samaritans contact prompted his involvement with the creation of a structured and specialised welfare office, probably the first of its kind at a language school in London. Since moving into ESOL teaching full-time in 2008 he has encountered many more opportunities to provide support for learners in distress.

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**The use of mobile  
technologies  
as a bridge to  
enhance learning  
for ESOL students**

# 10

## The use of mobile technologies as a bridge to enhance learning for ESOL students

Carol Savill-Smith, Rekha Chopra and Octavia Haure

### Introduction

Flori, a 44-year-old refugee from Kosovo has been in London for 14 years. Unemployed and a mother of three children, she lives in central London. Her initial years in the UK were spent mainly with people from her own community, where, for much of the time, she felt acutely lonely. She is now determined to progress, integrate and find a job, and so attends a local further education college. However, her language and literacy skills are only about entry level 2, even after four years in college. But now she possesses a powerful new tool – her iPhone, which she carries everywhere and uses regularly. Flori incessantly ‘Googles’, accesses the BBC news in English, uses map applications to find her way around, ‘Facebooks’ her classmates and ‘Skypes’ her family. Two years ago she couldn’t use an email account unaided. What has changed? Language and literacy practice in the palm of her hand.

A group of students go on a visit to the Science Museum to view ‘1001 Inventions’. Whilst there they take photographs of the splendid ‘elephant clock’, models of windmills and astrolabes (a medieval instrument once used to determine the altitude of the sun or other celestial bodies). Back at college, the photographs are uploaded to their class blog, and students write on the Posterous website, a platform particularly designed for mobile blogging, about their visit. Nothing extraordinary you may think about this, but these are multi-cultural migrant students, aged 16–19, mostly male from Afghanistan and Kurdistan, being encouraged to use their mobile devices to improve their social integration in their newly adopted living communities. As such the mobile devices are acting as a bridge – offering the opportunity to make links between a) the learning that takes place inside the classroom and the outside world, so learning does not just stop at the college gates; b) between learning with their peers at the same time, i.e. synchronous learning; and c) learning at other times and places convenient to them, i.e. asynchronous learning.

The above two vignettes demonstrate the innovative and useful role that mobile devices can play in helping people, whose first language is not English, to learn, understand and interact with the host community. They have been taken from two case studies, which were part of the MoLeNET programme. The MoLeNET programme was the UK’s largest and most diverse implementation of mobile learning to date,

spanning 2007–10. During this time it funded 104 individual mobile learning projects involving 147 colleges and 37 schools or, put another way, 40,000 learners and 7,000 staff. The Learning and Skills Council (now the Skills Funding Agency) and the consortia taking part, led by English Further Education colleges, together invested over £16 million in MoLeNET. These two case studies, both run by large London Further Education Colleges, are now introduced below.

## **Case Study 1 – the MoLeMentor ESOL project, led by the Working Men’s College, London**

### **The project and its focus**

The ‘MoLeMentor ESOL’ project was led by Working Men’s College in partnership with Westminster Kingsway College, City Lit College and Camden Adult and Community Learning services during 2009–10. It involved 361 English speakers of other languages (ESOL) learners from pre-entry to level 2, and 35 staff. Of the 19 classes, eight were based in the community and 11 held on main site college premises. The lead practitioner researcher for the project was based at Westminster Kingsway College, one of the largest further education colleges in the UK, with about 14,000 students. The focus of the project was to examine the impact and effect of handheld technologies on students’ language and literacy skills and their employability.

### **The learners involved and the mobile devices used**

Of the 361 learners who took part, half had been living in Britain for six years or more, and just under half had never been employed in their home country. The majority of the learners were female, and just under a quarter had a job at the time of the intervention (available childcare was an issue). These students did not necessarily have relevant IT skills to make them employable. Their families may own a computer, but it was their husband or children who were the predominant users.

The project wished to encourage collaboration amongst learners as a way of improving ESOL learning. One of the main ways to do this was via the use of MoLeMentors – encouraging the more confident and competent students in the use of IT to provide mentoring support to their peers. Each mentor supported four MoLeMentees, which increased their confidence, from the proud revelation of one student *‘I presented some useful websites to the class’* and *‘I am really appreciated’*, to collaborative learning potential of *‘I learned a lot when I am helping others, I am happy to help people because its help me to learn some ideas from them’* [sic].

A range of technology was used – UMPCs or ultra-mobile PCs (small, lightweight computer), Sony PSPs, iPod Touches, video cameras and digital voice recorders. For those students who were given a UMPCs, albeit temporarily, it allowed them to work with technology regularly and to develop confidence. By providing an internet connection via a dongle, students could access learning resources and information whenever they wanted – many of these students do not feel culturally comfortable in accessing Wi-Fi facilities in venues such as McDonald’s or Starbucks.

## **Case Study 2 – the eGo ESOL project, led by West Thames College, London**

### **The project and its focus**

The eGo (English on the Go) project was run at West Thames College during 2009–10. It involved more than 100 ESOL learners, ranging from entry level 1 to level 1, and ten staff. West Thames College is a large London college, with about 6,500 students on its role. The focus of the project was to improve learners' English and literacy skills outside the classroom.

### **The learners involved and the mobile devices used**

Three different groups of ESOL learners participated in the project. The first group consisted mainly of adults from the Asian subcontinent, Middle Eastern countries (Iran and Iraq) and from Eastern Europe. Although there were some men in this group, women made up the majority. If computers were available at home, these were invariably used by the male member(s) of the family or by their children. The second group, again predominantly women, were adult ESOL learners studying hair and beauty as a vocational subject. The third group consisted of younger learners (16–19 years old) who were from similar ethnic backgrounds but with a stronger bias towards male learners from Afghanistan and Kurdistan. They did not always have access to learning resources at home. They fell into two broad categories – those who were ambitious and keen to progress but were held back by language barriers and those who may never have attended school or may not have the inclination to study but nevertheless needed to learn English in order to live in Britain and to integrate into society.

Many adult ESOL learners, particularly female learners from Asian or Middle Eastern backgrounds, have little or no access to English learning opportunities outside the classroom. In addition to the normal difficulties of acquiring a new language at an older age, some learners had never been to school nor ever been encouraged to study and lacked literacy and study skills. Six hours a week of classroom access to English was not enough for most of them but they had few opportunities to practise the language outside the classroom. To build their confidence in speaking English and to enable them to carry out the functions of daily life in Britain, they needed to practise their language skills outside the classroom.

In this project all learners used smartphones.

### **Mobile technologies – a bridge for learning**

One of the major problems ESOL students face is the loneliness and isolation of their situation. The natural way of dealing with this is to gravitate towards other people of the same language and ethnicity – this, in turn, can become a barrier to language development and integration. The authors of this paper suggest that the use of mobile devices can act as a bridge to facilitate learning in a number of ways – as a 'communication bridge', a 'community bridge', and an 'independence bridge'.

## Communication bridge

Mobile devices offer many communication possibilities. Within the classroom, they allow easy communication between students from a wide range of backgrounds. Information can easily be passed across the language and ethnicity divisions of a classroom. The following are some examples, drawn from the case studies, of how mobile devices can be used to aid communication.

### *Speaking*

Skype (a proprietary voice-over-Internet protocol service) can be used to encourage students to communicate with their teacher and with each other. In case study one, the MoLeMentors initially answered their mentees' questions using this service, with tutors facilitating the conversations, but soon the students became independent (of the tutor) and much of the communication was found to have taken place well out of class time.

Previously hesitant speakers in lower level ESOL groups were encouraged to talk in greater depth when they were using material which they had created themselves as opposed to using textbook pictures. Sony PSPs were found useful for this, because personalised visual prompts can be recorded whilst capturing still images and videos, the vocabulary level can be fixed, and it uses simple buttons and direction mechanisms which require only a little pre-teaching.

Learners created their own learning resources from videos they had taken (this could be anything – the process of cooking a dish or creating a spreadsheet), and then used them to describe the process to their class. The teacher then used the learners' own resources to teach grammar points which could be practised repeatedly both in and outside the classroom by playing the videos.

Learners' interview skills were improved by role-playing a formal job interview, during which photographs were taken. Afterwards, they used Microsoft Photo Story software, to create a visual digital story from the photographs which was projected onto a whiteboard to allow peer critique and group learning. It could then be used as a pictorial prompt in an extension activity, or sent to the teacher for analysis and feedback given via email. Many teaching opportunities can be planned using mobile devices' ability to take photographs of events, articles, labels or blurbs in museums, which can be used as prompts for later written work.

The voice recording feature on mobile devices was used for recording, comparison or descriptions of places or persons. Learners then listened to each other's voice recording and peer assessed for pronunciation and use of various grammar points.

### *Writing*

Students' own images were used as prompts for writing. Students also made use of colour coded text, helping them plan the text they were about to write (such as using 'SimpleMindX on the iPod Touch). This contributed to the students' understanding of text structure.

Blogs are a popular form of recording thoughts and undertaking descriptive writing. In the case studies there were many instances of class blogs being written either



for use in the classroom or after visits to various places such as museums. In this way, learning was extended outside the classroom, and the outside was brought into the classroom. Material could then be used for future discussion and self or peer assessment. Teachers often reported that the public nature of these forums improved the quality of the presented written work.

### *Communication*

When using mobiles for communication, many teachers commented that the communication dynamic in the classroom had changed from a top-down, teacher-led, approach to a more horizontal approach where ideas were shared. Students felt better able to contact other students for help, rather than being teacher-dependent. In this way, the possibilities that mobile devices afford for communication lessen the loneliness experienced by many ESOL students.

### **Community bridge**

The use of mobile devices can help students build links with different communities including their children's school, their workplace and within their learning community.

In case study one, users reported that they were able to 'Google' information for their children's homework. This represented quite a role reversal at home. Parents were now able to re-assert their authoritative position as the 'information provider' for their children, rather than to take a more passive role as an observer of their children's progress in school, in a foreign language. In case study two, women who had previously struggled to understand what their own children were doing on computers at home found that they could join them in learning activities online, thus fostering intergenerational learning opportunities.

Isolation is often experienced by ESOL learners on work placements if they cannot communicate accurately and confidently in English with colleagues or their clients. This can be somewhat overcome through the use of videos – if on placement the learners can upload them to blogging sites for collaborative comment, or if in the classroom they can use them to practise the language used. It was found that this increased their confidence in communicating in English with their clients, and allowed them to integrate more easily with colleagues at work. For the younger learners, it was also found that their confidence at work could also be increased simply by using mobile devices, which are regarded as 'cool'.

Many students use Facebook, a social networking service, as part of their daily lives. This use, out of college, can foster and maintain relationships and add to greater cohesion and dynamic when back in class which, in turn, can have a positive effect on their attendance and retention on the course.

Mobile devices allow learners to maintain links with their country of origin. To stay in contact with their family, country and its language diminishes some of the immigration trauma and loneliness which can be experienced.

### **Independence bridge**

The facilities provided by mobile devices can offer a highly-valued level of independence to the user and help to provide a bridge with society at large.

Much of this is related to the user being able to search the internet for information or the use of mobile applications or apps. Examples of this are:

- Journey planners and map applications offer greater independence to the user, allowing them to find out information for themselves, often accessed whilst they are on the move.
- Dictionary, grammar and spelling applications are useful, especially where students could also record their own vocabulary into the system for future playback. Idiom (the natural manner of speaking) translator applications, for example [IdiomSite.com](http://IdiomSite.com), were specifically noted by students as being beneficial.
- Encyclopaedias, such as Wikipedia, are useful for finding out information.
- Text translation tools, such as Google Translate, are useful for translating difficult or unfamiliar words and text structure applications.
- Information gathered from online sites such as those describing countries and cultures, travel, weather, news information sites, shopping and the payment of bills using online billing are all considered helpful.
- Some students were required to take their British Citizenship Tests and the use of the website 'Life in the UK' and its practice tests were considered invaluable (also for those applying for settlement, or indefinite leave to remain, in the UK). Similar comments were made about the usefulness of websites relating to driving tests (theory and practical).

All the above encourage the user to engage with information in English, reading and writing both formally and informally. They encourage the user to feel part of society and remove potential areas of stress such as having to take part in face-to-face interaction or make telephone calls to access such information.

## **The impact of mobile technology on the ESOL curriculum**

When these two case studies were undertaken, the projects had to provide the mobile devices used by the learners, as many did not have use of such devices, or had low-specification devices. In the past two years mobile technology has developed, and there has been an extraordinary growth in use of these devices to such an extent that many ESOL students coming to classes now use high-specification devices as part of their lives.

This use of mobile devices is having an impact on the way in which literacy skills are acquired. Although learners can still acquire these without digital methods, many come to the classroom with powerful devices in their pockets which give access to the internet and web-based information handling. Therefore, through their own need to access information, either in their own native language or in English, literacy skills can now be developed much further informally. For example, it is useful to have a working knowledge of the internet in order to search and apply for a job, manage utility bills, purchase tickets, find directions or access high street shops. To carry out these actions effectively online, the authors suggest that students require, and subsequently acquire (often without teacher input), some of the skimming and scanning skills which ordinarily play a large part of the ESOL and literacy curriculum. Students can become familiar with where to look on a web

page, where to click, where to confirm, where to repeat information, as these skills are required in their daily non-classroom world. Proofreading skills can often be enhanced too because many web pages do not allow you to complete an action without confirming intentions to do so. As students using mobile devices now often have some of these skills, to a greater or lesser extent, the authors suggest it raises a number of questions also relating to the ESOL curriculum in the future:

- Does the use of online dictionaries, which requires the use of ‘enter and search’, rather than knowledge of dictionary position, mean that teaching the alphabet requires the same degree of focus?
- Does capitalisation need to be taught in the same way, as students are usually familiar with the terms ‘case-sensitive’, ‘lowercase’ and ‘uppercase’ and which have a different significance and weight online?
- Should new verbs need to be added to the curriculum, such as ‘to Google’, ‘to Skype’ and to ‘Facebook’?
- Should a wider range of punctuation be taught earlier in the curriculum as characters such as ‘hash’, ‘semi-colon’ and ‘slash’ need to be understood?
- Should students at the lowest ESOL level be taught about email and their attachments?

Along with this, it could also be inferred that the teacher’s role and identity is changing. Good ESOL teachers use learning opportunities which are present everywhere to help their students to improve their speaking and listening skills and their confidence – not just through practice in the classroom, and not just through the use of technology. When mobile devices are brought into the classroom by learners, teachers need to realise that their use changes the classroom dynamic, and it is possible for them to relinquish ‘control’ of the classroom and allow learners to take ownership of their learning in the true sense. This gives learners the opportunity to become responsible for creating their own learning resources as well as determining the shape and form of their learning. Learners can be encouraged to work independently as well as in collaboration with each other and begin to view learning as something that can be fun and engaging while realising the value of mobile devices as learning tools.

## **Teacher awareness of mobile technological developments**

There are now apps made for most devices which are of use in language learning, such as quizzes to develop language, practise vocabulary and grammar skills, and weather apps to make world comparisons. Many of these are free to download and use. Podcasts are also useful to develop listening skills and develop knowledge and understanding. Even the more general features of mobile phones can be used in innovative ways such as text messaging for the polling of answers to quizzes, the calendar function as a means to start a personalised discussion and the list of contacts for alphabetical ordering. Teachers, therefore, need to be aware that learners already have these devices, access to a wide range of information, and also the possibility of a set of skills which previously had to be taught. Of course, no two ESOL students are exactly alike; they have different levels of literacy and IT skills.

Learners at a more basic level, as a result of using a mobile device, may come to classes with the realisation of what skills (IT or literacy) they need to improve. Therefore, it is important that teachers keep abreast of technological developments as these have an impact on the skills students possess, and develop them further to really engage learners in improving their English.


## Concluding thoughts

Nowadays many ESOL students come to class with a smartphone already in their pocket. The authors of this article propose that the use of such devices can act as a bridge to facilitate communication inside and outside the classroom, to make links with different communities, to offer a level of independence and to keep in contact with their country of origin. These devices can, of course, be a powerful teaching and learning device too. The findings of two case studies of the use of such devices by ESOL learners have been described using the 'bridge' metaphor.

What is clear is that ESOL learners coming to classes proficient in the use of their mobile devices naturally acquire, to some extent, a collection of skills which previously needed to be taught. This raises questions as to whether changes will be required in the future to the National ESOL curriculum to reflect such digital literacy. What is important is that teachers keep abreast of technological developments and are aware of the skills, both literacy and IT, that each ESOL learner possesses – these need to be harnessed and developed further to both engage learners and improve their English language skills.

Some information relating to the MoLeNET projects can be found at:

- <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/> (search term molenet), and at
- [www.talpalink.co.uk/MoLeNET.html](http://www.talpalink.co.uk/MoLeNET.html)



**Carol Savill-Smith** believes firmly in the power of technology to complement the learning process. Not everyone learns in the same way and different technologies can be adapted and used to make learning relevant, motivational and to help towards achieving learning outcomes. Carol has undertaken e-learning research and evaluation for the last 12 years, primarily in the field of learning with mobile technologies and computer games. She currently works as the mEducation Research Manager at the GSMA, on their Connected Living Programme. Prior to this, Carol worked for 11 years at the LSN – latterly as Senior Researcher on the three-year MoLeNET Programme. Carol holds a PhD in the use of ICT in Education from Brunel University, UK (her dissertation examined secondary school pupils' experiences of data logging and its impact on their learning). She is a qualified secondary school teacher, has worked as a college lecturer, and also in the fields of packaging, insurance and metal broking.

**Octavia Haure** grew up in a bilingual home (English/German), and now lives in a French/English one, and has spent most of her life thinking and working between different languages and cultures. She has been involved in language teaching all her working life, as well as translation and interpreting, at least informally, since childhood. Her main professional interests have always been education and language. Much of her time outside of work is spent working with the Lingala-speaking community of South-East London. Her personal interests (and previous publication) include researching how culture and language interrelate and affect human behaviour, responses and communication and how different thinking styles across cultures impact on the structure and form of written text. She currently works as an ESOL and Literacy lecturer at Westminster Kingsway College in Central London and teaches on the MA and BA applied translation degrees at the London Met.

**Rekha Chopra** believes that technology has a crucial role to play in the successful acquisition of language skills by ESOL learners. She is an ESOL teacher at West Thames College, where she is also involved in the delivery of PGCE modules, such as blended learning. She models good practice in the sessions to enable teacher trainees to recognise the value of using a virtual learning environment and encourage collaborative learning through forums (both, synchronous and asynchronous), wikis and other web 2.0 tools as well as mobile technology. At the College she is part of a small team of learning practitioners responsible for leading on the dissemination of best practice in building independent learning. She also works with curriculum teams across the college to maximise independent learning opportunities and to identify and support the development of new learning and teaching initiatives.

**The personal  
made impersonal  
and the impersonal  
made personal:  
reading circles and  
language learning**

# 11

## The personal made impersonal and the impersonal made personal: reading circles and language learning

Sam Duncan

### Introduction

*Six people sit around a table. They read, talk and think. They are learning about words, trams, hospitals, verb tenses and brutal regimes. They are teaching, debating and interpreting. They are listening and remembering. They are creating something together; they are a reading circle.*

This chapter will look at what reading circles can offer adult refugee/migrant English speakers of other language (ESOL) learners by examining three case studies from my own teaching and research experience. These three case studies represent three different types or aspects of ESOL teaching, as well as demonstrating three different ways that a reading circle, or a reading circle ethos, can work in relation to existing structures of formal provision. They also each tell a slightly different story about what reading circles can offer their members.

### Reading circles

I am using the term reading circle to describe the groups which result when people gather to read and discuss books. These have also been called book groups, book clubs, literature circles, reading groups and reading clubs. They are a form of communal reading, and though they are certainly a trend of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century Anglophone worlds, they have a very long history:

*Reading in groups has been around for as long as there has been reading. A history of it would fill a book, probably a shelf. The Romans did it, emigrants on board ship to Australia did it, Schubert and his friends meeting to read and discuss the poems of Heine were doing it (Hartley, 2002: 1).*

Many historians of reading and the book would also argue that communal (and aloud) reading was much more common than individual, silent reading until two or three hundred years ago. Others argue that reading is still primarily a communal act, despite our enduring cultural myth of the solitary and romantically pallid book-worm.

Not all communal reading, however, is in the form of a reading circle. An author reading from her latest novel in a packed bookstore isn't a reading circle, nor is a father reading to his children. The reciprocity of the circle formation is crucial: a round table of equals working together, *'the point of the image is the equidistance and equal view of one another: I can see your truth and you can see mine'* (Boyarin, 1993: 230). Reading circles, past and present, are also characterised by a lack of a paper-trail. They leave little evidence, but historical writings indicate that newly Christianised Anglo-Saxons interpreted religious texts in discussion circles, that both the religious and lay-worlds of medieval Europe gathered in circles to read and discuss, and that seventeenth-century spinning-girls in France and Germany read and talked together as they worked. The Victorians – from the 'mutual improvement societies' in Britain, Australia and New Zealand to the Hamilton sisters in their aunt's bedroom in Indiana, USA – gathered to read and listen, to ask, answer and argue, for educational, political and social purposes.

Reading circles today meet regularly in homes and cafés all over the world to discuss novels (or other books), and for similarly intertwined educational, political and social purposes (in 2010 I spoke to groups in Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, France, Canada, the US and UK). Some groups read aloud together, some discuss what they have already read alone, some do both and nearly all share food, drink and laughter. Elizabeth Long's (2003) work on the reading circles in Houston, Texas foregrounds the importance of talk: of people coming together to talk their way to conclusions (*not* to present already formulated conclusions), and to talk, indirectly and directly, about the things that members feel they need to talk about. Reading circles are communities which form and develop, creating communal identities while providing contexts for members to explore issues of individual, personal identity. They are 'a blast' and they are deadly serious; they are both 'after-work social gatherings' and 'life rafts' (see Atwood, 2005).

Reading circles are therefore a common (though often invisible) contemporary social practice with a potentially profound role in individuals' lives, and a long history. Reading circles are also a pedagogy, one which has been examined through educational research conducted predominantly in two contexts: English (as a foreign) Language Teaching (ELT) and English as a primary and secondary school subject in English speaking countries. This research largely concerns reading circles set up in existing provision, within formal classes, where the teacher relinquishes a degree of teacher control and encourages the group to act as a circle: reading, talking and self-managing. Research into the use of reading circles in ELT has found reading circles to be a valuable pedagogy for developing speaking and listening skills, vocabulary and greater confidence in reading and writing, reading to children, and participating as members of a community. Research conducted in English classes in primary and secondary schools has also found reading circles to develop greater confidence, decision-making ability and learner-autonomy, as well as reading comprehension and critical reading skills.



Researchers have noted the connection between the reading skills involved in critically engaging with a text and the social/organisational skills required to work in circle-formation. Research does seem to indicate that reading circles, or types of reading circles as they can exist within formal educational settings, have something to offer language and literacy development<sup>15</sup>.

### Case study one: meta-learners

The first was a reading circle in a local North London public library in 2005. It was set up as part of a further education (FE) college outreach initiative into the local community by putting on courses and projects in and with the neighbouring library. I was a teacher at the FE college and had the idea of starting a reading circle for those who were not yet (and may never be) students at the college. I made a poster advertising it, displayed it around the library and crossed my fingers. Five people turned up, all adult learners between the ages of 30 and 65, all speakers of other languages whose aim was to improve their English language, all migrants or refugees, all confident in their literacy in their first (and other) languages and all lovers of literature. They wanted to read '*great [English Language] twentieth-century classics*'. I took on the role of facilitator and advisor – they wanted my ideas for books, they asked me questions about literary history or cultural convention, and turned to me for definitions and pronunciation of words. In this sense, I was put in a 'teacher' or 'expert' role, perhaps more so than in either of the other two case studies. Yet, this reading circle was also the furthest outside of formal educational provision. It was not a course or part of a course. Members of the group spoke of why they had specifically chosen not to attend an ESOL course: one person because she did not have time to commit to more than a few hours a week, several because they felt they had already 'done that', and two spoke of feeling that an ESOL class would be too 'childish'.

Despite using me as language/literary/cultural 'expert', they were strongly self-running from the beginning. They decided how they wanted to work: reading at home an agreed-upon amount; discussing what they had read together; asking questions about vocabulary; a bit of reading aloud with a focus on vocabulary and pronunciation; and a large amount of animated discussion. When they finished one novel, they chose another (after asking me for recommendations). From October to May they read four novels: *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *Double Indemnity* and *Disgrace*.

The reading circle members spoke on a regular basis of what they felt they were getting out of the circle; in this sense they were meta-learners, strongly aware of and interested in their own learning. They spoke of increased confidence in speaking and listening, the development of vocabulary and language structures (tenses in particular for one member, articles for another), pronunciation, and how they were learning about English-language culture and literature. However, in conversation

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<sup>15</sup> Reading circles as ancient literacy practice and contemporary language pedagogy are further explored in *Reading Circles, Novels and Adult Reading Development* by Sam Duncan: an exploration of what a reading circle approach can offer adult emergent readers, and what adult literacy learners can tell us about novel reading. [www.continuumbooks.com/books/detail.aspx?BookId=158791&SearchType=Basic](http://www.continuumbooks.com/books/detail.aspx?BookId=158791&SearchType=Basic)

towards the end of our time together, their discussion focused on two main points, two insights into the use of reading circles as an adult ESOL pedagogy. The first was what one member called 'the drive to speak'. They argued that the strength of their interest in the themes of the novels (themes which were meaningful for them in their adult lives, lives marked by migration and at the front line of political action) *pushed them to say much more than they would previously have thought possible*. They simply had so much they wanted to say that they said more, and used more vocabulary and language structures than they thought they were able to do in English. Another member, an Iranian refugee, remembered a discussion they had while reading Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale*, about the relationship between events in the book and her experiences at university in Tehran. She, and others, had so much they 'needed to say' about how states are able to develop certain powers and how citizens can initially be complicit in creating something they later come to hate and fear, that they spoke, debated, argued *a lot*. The reading circle members were driven to communicate by the strength of their personal interest and experience in the topics or themes they were finding in the novels we read.

The second point similarly relates to the 'adult' nature of the workings of the group, but while the 'drive to speak' is about the content (*'the complexities of totalitarianism instead of how to make an appointment at the dentist'* as one member put it), their second main point was about 'working together as adult people' rather than being put, or locating themselves, in the position of learner in a classroom. This seems to be a point about expectations and the 'subject positions' we put ourselves in. Adult ESOL classes don't, on the whole, treat their learners as children, and lessons are designed to ensure that adults feel they are being treated as such. However, several members of the reading circle felt that they had been treated as children in the ESOL classes they had accessed, and that this was something they had expected when joining a class. They felt that formal educational provision was something for children and young people and therefore saw the physical design and interactions of a classroom as (inevitably) childish (if, for example, you see homework as something given only to children, then you will inevitably feel that being given homework is childish and not 'adult').

These expectations could be seen as cause and effect of what social psychology calls the 'subject positions' we put ourselves in: positions which are created by our and others' expectations. If I walk into a classroom as the teacher, I take on a culturally constructed 'position' of teacher and this determines what I do and how and why I do it, where I sit, how I behave, even the thoughts I have. If I walk into a classroom as a student, I am taking on another 'position' and will act, speak and think accordingly. These people felt that ESOL classes were childish because they identified the subject position of 'student' as non-adult, and not a position in which they could act as adults, with adult lives and experience. They may have felt that the subject position of 'student' was one which did not call for, or *value*, their adult expertise. By contrast, as members of the reading circle (though organised by me and though they used me as a 'expert' resource), they did not put themselves into subject positions of 'students', but rather as equal members of a group. This may have allowed them to feel that their experience and expertise as adults was being recognised and used as something of worth.

## Case study two: participant-led differentiation

The second case study is a reading circle set up in the last 40 minutes of a weekly three-hour adult literacy class in a large London FE college. I was the teacher of the adult literacy class, a group of ten adult learners. Two members of the group were adult literacy learners who had grown up speaking English, two members should have been placed in ESOL classes, but the majority represented the ESOL/literacy overlap: migrants and refugees who had been in this country for a number of years, were reasonably confident communicating in English orally, but struggled with reading and writing. Some struggled with English literacy because of a lack of confidence with literacy in their home language(s), some because of a lack of familiarity with the Roman script, and some were confident in their home language literacy but struggled with English literacy because of grammar and vocabulary limitations. The group expressed an early interest in reading longer texts, such as novels, had heard of reading circles and wanted to try ‘being’ a reading circle.

Unlike the first case study, this group met as a class within formal educational provision. However, we created a distinction between our usual weekly course time and our reading circle time by allocating a specific time-slot and rearranging the seating so that the room looked and felt different. Also unlike the first case study, I made a conscious effort to make my participation in the reading circle as marginal as possible. I facilitated the choice of novel – *Passenger* (2008) by Billy Cowie – by a vote, and helped to organise a system of weekly volunteer chairperson and note-taker, but after this I sat at the margins and let the group self-run. I encouraged participants to ask each other about vocabulary, rather than answer myself. This was part of a deliberate distancing from the teacher–learner dynamic of the first portion of each weekly session. The group also read more slowly (being less confident readers than the group in the first case study), reading one novel from November 2008 to May 2009. They established a weekly pattern of talking about what they had read at home, taking turns to read aloud, stopping to discuss words, ideas and ‘what was going on’.

Two findings from this case study seem particularly relevant here. Firstly, the workings of the group demonstrated what I am calling ‘*participant-led differentiation*’. Each member of the circle had particular needs (learning and otherwise) and adapted what they did in the group (and at home in preparation for the group) in order to meet those particular needs. This meant that the reading circle provided differentiation, or personalised learning, personalised by the individual themselves. For example, one member of the circle found it challenging to ‘remember what was going on in the story’, and so used her notebook (I gave each member of the group a notebook to use however they liked) exclusively to record information about the plot and characters as they developed. She also asked her fellow reading circle members about plot and character every week and adjusted her notes accordingly. Another wanted to develop her vocabulary and used her notebook to record lists of words, some used in sentences, some with English definitions and some with definitions in her first language. She underlined words she didn’t understand as she was reading (at home and in the circle), asked the other reading circle members what they meant and recorded their responses. Another member wanted to work on his spelling,

pulling out lists of words from the novel that he wanted to learn to spell. In this way, each member of the circle tailored their 'circle' (what they did, what they learnt, what they spent time on) to their individual needs. They were working together, as a group, but they were also each working on his or her own personalised programme.

The significance of this participant-led differentiation seems most acute when looking at the ESOL/literacy overlap in this group, at how the needs of both first and second language learners were being met within one prolonged activity (the reading circle work). The member mentioned above, who wanted to work on building her vocabulary, was an ESOL learner confident in her literacy in other languages and was using the reading circle as an opportunity to expand her English vocabulary. Another member of the group had a very large vocabulary but found it very difficult to phonically decode words she had not seen before. Her difficulties were around literacy. She listened carefully, following along in the text when others read, and asked for help decoding when she read, so that she could expand the number of words she recognised as whole words, while also developing her knowledge of sound-symbol relationships for phonic decoding. The participant-led differentiation (and mutual exchange of expertise, explored below) which emerged in the workings of the reading circle meant that the needs of the ESOL learners, of the adult literacy learners and of those in between on this complex spectrum, were all met. This was a very happy surprise for me as teacher, as meeting this range of language and literacy needs within one group is one of the greatest challenges, I feel, facing English teachers of migrants and refugees.

The above participant-led differentiation could be seen as a key feature of working in reading circles (just as it was a feature of Victorian 'mutual improvement societies', see Radcliffe, 1997), an aspect of their 'ideal pedagogy' (Duncan 2012), as everyone participates in a way which addresses their interests, needs and confidences. Another way of seeing this is that a reading circle is a mutual exchange of expertise. Everyone 'takes' according to their needs and 'gives' according to their expertise. The adult literacy learner who needed support with decoding was able to help others with the meanings of certain words, and the woman working to develop her vocabulary was able to help others piece together the plot and help still others with phonic decoding. Someone had medical expertise (relevant to the plot), someone had an excellent memory for names and someone else had strong skills in inference and interpretation.

Crucially, for some migrant/refugee members of the reading circle, command of their home language became a valuable tool in this exchange. One person's strength in phonic decoding was developed from her home language and another person's inference and interpretation skills were transferred from her home language reading experience. These home language linguistic skills were exactly the expertise required by the group to read, together, a novel in English. In the very sharing of expertise which characterises a reading circle, home language linguistic skills and confidences are of premium and potentially explicit value.

### **Case study three: the drive to speak**

The third case study is the furthest from being a 'real life' reading circle. It concerns the use of a reading circle within formal educational provision, not as an alternative

to classes (as in case study one) or as a discrete part of the course time (as in case study two) but as a activity or pedagogy. From September 2011 to June 2012 I taught a weekly enrichment programme for a group of five men who had come to Britain as refugees and who were now enrolled on a teacher education course at a university. The purpose of the enrichment course was to support them with their studies and teaching practice placements, mainly developing the English language skills they felt they needed to successfully complete their courses and teach effectively. They all had higher education degrees from their countries of origin and some also had taken degrees in the UK. Our curriculum was negotiated, their desires and my diagnostics. Like the members of the first case study, they were meta-learners – interested in what they were learning and how they could learn it.

Just over halfway through the academic year, they spoke of wanting to read a play and suggested I choose something. I chose Brendan Kennelly's version of Sophocles' *Antigone* (Kennelly, 2006) and they chose how we read it: reading the whole play aloud together, taking turns to play different characters and stopping after every page or two to discuss vocabulary and ideas. They discussed the politics of the action in great detail, relating it to their own experience. They chose their favourite speeches, performed them and talked of what these speeches meant to them. We did this over a two-month period, doing other bits of English language and literacy work alongside. We were lucky and the National Theatre performed a version of *Antigone* that spring/summer and we went to see it together.

The members of this circle commented on how our communal reading work helped with their English by developing their 'vocabularies, pronunciation', 'discussion', 'interest in reading books' 'reading critically' 'interpretation' and 'improved my writing'. One man commented that 'good teamwork' makes 'effective teaching'. Like the participants in the first case study, these men described the 'drive to speak': it 'stirred my emotions ... and motivated me to keep reading and talking more and more' and 'it was so relevant ... it pushed me'. They highlighted their 'emotional involvement' and how this led them to both study the play more carefully at home and talk about it more together. Like the participants in case study two, they also made sure they used it to work on their particular needs (one man was most interested in writing summaries, another on developing his spelling, and another on voice projection). In this respect the findings from this case study are a repetition or reinforcement of the findings of the previous two: the drive to speak, the adulthood of the topic, and the facility to work towards one's own needs while – integrally – doing something communally, with and for each other and the motivation that brings.

However, there are two new emphases which may be important to examine. The first relates to expertise. The mutual exchange of expertise was about linguistics and literacy skills, it was also about pedagogy (as part of their teacher development), and it was an exchange of historical and political knowledge and experience. They were able to teach me and each other about historical and contemporary political events related to the plot of *Antigone*. This is particularly relevant to adult migrants/refugees because of the (often) political expertise that their experience has developed. Adult refugees are simply more likely than non-refugees to have a certain kind of political knowledge.

Yet, there was something even more crucial going on. Based on my discussions with a great many refugees, I would like to make the generalisation that adult refugees/migrants have often, in going through the asylum and benefits systems, been reconfigured as people who not only have nothing, but who know nothing – as a non-experts. On top of whatever has happened to them before they arrive, a dramatic loss of confidence/self-esteem/status often results from the early experiences of refugees in their new country. It would be very grandiose – and a little crazy – to suggest that working in a reading circle can reverse the effects of years of a lack of respect and restore a lost sense of personal value and expertise. But my experience does indicate that working as a reading circle is a way of working which calls for, values and respects a diverse assortment of expertise (linguistic, logistical, political) and that this process can do something to begin to restore those lost selves.

Secondly, when discussing their ‘drive to speak’, I was reminded that through their communal interpretation of literature, reading circle members are able to talk of the things they really want and need to talk about – indirectly. The members of the Antigone group were able to talk about the gravely personal through the impersonal context of talking about an ancient play. They were talking about Sophocles’ Creon, not about this dictator or that warlord. They were talking of a literary tragedy, not (directly) of the tragedies they had witnessed. Speaking of the benefits of a reading circle he was running in a different time and place, a psychiatrist asked himself ‘I wonder if it’s that people feel safer with a book. Whether it’s impersonal or they feel they can be themselves more’ (Davis, 2009, p. 36). We may be able to ‘be ourselves more’ precisely because it’s impersonal. It’s not about us; it’s about a book.

## Concluding thoughts

Seen together, these three case studies could be taken as three models for using reading circles with adult ESOL learners, from a group which comes together only as a reading circle (but which could be set up under the umbrella of an educational institution or library, and with a teacher/facilitator available), to a group set up in an agreed slot within an existing, scheduled class, to using a reading circle as an activity or pedagogic approach (one approach of many) within an ongoing teaching situation. Additionally, the three case studies each say something different about the potential role of the teacher: as the language or literature expert, the facilitator or organiser. They also foreground the value of communal reading and discussion, whether the powerful ‘drive to speak’ noted by two of the case studies, or the communal interpretive action emphasised by the other. They all highlight the potential ‘adulthood’ of the group, that reading circles are an authentic adult literacy practice, and a way of working which involves not only adult topics (in the novels chosen and the way the readers choose to discuss them) but adult ways of working: mutuality, shared responsibility, a sharing of expertise (life experience, study skills, linguistic skill).

This sharing of expertise, along with participant-led differentiation, means the needs of both literacy and ESOL learners (and the language and literacy needs within any ESOL or English as an additional learner [EAL] learner) can be met, but it also has something to say about migrant or refugee learners in particular. Skill and

confidence in a home language, whether oral or written, is one of the elements of expertise that can be shared. Someone who is good at interpreting Persian poetry will be able to help others interpret a Canadian novel. This is a key point – a crucial and concrete way that the home language is used in the development of other languages. Secondly, many refugees speak of the feeling of being devalued when in a new country – as if they have been stripped naked of expertise of any kind, without respect or value. One of the things that refugees have told me that they valued about certain educational experiences (but not others) was the sense of a return of the dignity required ‘to change from refugee to a citizen life’. Once again, of course it would be a nonsense to say that all reading circles put their members into the position of experts in such a way as to induce a return of dignity, or that other teaching methods or set-ups don’t. However, this does seem to be one potential benefit of a reading circle approach, and one too important not to consider.

Finally, talking about our reading provides us with another way to talk about what we really want to be talking about. Reading circles can be the personal made impersonal and the impersonal made personal. They are a literacy practice, a language teaching pedagogy and they are one way that adults, with all different past experiences – some more traumatic and some less traumatic – are able to talk about our lives.

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**ESOL in the Hebrides  
and Island Voices –  
‘Hey, hang on  
a minute, tha  
mise bilingual!’**

# 12

## ESOL in the Hebrides and Island Voices – ‘Hey, hang on a minute, tha mise bilingual!’

Gordon Wells

### Scene one – Kallin Shellfish, 2006

The camera pans slowly – and sometimes shakily – to reveal bare Hebridean landscapes and turbulent seascapes. It zooms in on animal life – wild and domestic – and then turns to follow in some detail the various stages in handling crabs, scallops and other shellfish in a Grimsay processing plant. Finally, it follows the workers home to the central ‘metropolis’ of Balivanich (population 600), with its few terraced rows of former military housing, and its bank, post office, and airport. Over the picture sequence two narrators take it in turns to supply a voiceover commentary, adding informative detail in short simple sentences in Polish- and Russian-inflected English:

*‘There may not be very many trees, but there are lots of sheep.’*

*‘This is downtown Balivanich, where we live.’*

Either a taste for dry humour is a human characteristic that crosses international borders, or the film-makers, despite their still limited English skills, have quickly absorbed a local preference for laconic, self-deprecatory understatement. The film is not Gaelic, but you might well call it ‘Gàidhealach’<sup>16</sup> in spirit – unpretentious and unrefined, simple and true.

### Scene two – Grogarry Lodge, 2011

In the community-owned hunting lodge the end-of-term midsummer party is in full swing. Learners of English and learners of Gaelic from various community classes up and down the islands get together for an international evening of home-made food and home-produced music. The children are there too, dressed in their finest. The ESOL learners distribute a booklet they’ve been working on, featuring their own poems and recipes. The centrepiece of the evening is a seemingly chaotic multilingual class in which everybody has to learn some sentences of two other languages, be it Russian, Polish, German, Italian or Gaelic. An eight-year-old catches the camera’s eye. She’s the late-arriving daughter of the Latvian narrator on the ‘Kallin Shellfish’ video, made five years previously. But she’s learnt Hebridean English already, she sings in Gaelic, she

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<sup>16</sup> It’s hard to capture the full connotations in English, but a literal translation might be ‘pertaining to Gaelic culture’, often inadequately rendered in English as ‘Highland’. Many UK ESOL learners and teachers may be familiar with the word ‘desi’, from Hindi, Urdu, or Punjabi. It covers much the same kind of implicative territory.

knows some Polish too, and now she's getting the chance to teach her home language, Russian. With patience, clarity, and great confidence she takes the film-maker through a simple greeting, simultaneously showing the words written out in the Cyrillic alphabet to help reinforce the message.

And deadpan humour is never far away:

**Teacher:** *'Where is Latvia?'*

**Latvian Russian speaker:** *'Beside Russia.'*

**Teacher:** *'And where's Russia?'*

**Polish speaker:** *'Beside Poland.'*

## The community

The Uists (North and South Uist, Benbecula, and a number of smaller islands all connected by causeway) form most of the southern half of the Outer Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland. Crofting and fishing have been the traditional mainstays of the local economy, and remain important as sources of employment, though often only part-time in a context of pluri-activity. Other major employers are the local council and health board in the public sector, and the privatised Hebrides rocket range, as well as construction trades and tourism. The total population is around 5,000. There is a central secondary school for all the Uists, and a number of feeder primary schools are spread throughout the islands. There are two ferry ports offering connections to the mainland at the north and south ends, and an airport in the middle with twice-daily one-hour flights to Glasgow, as well as inter-island connections to the rest of the Outer Hebrides – Barra to the south, and the much larger Lewis and Harris to the north.

In quantitative terms then, whether in population size or economic power these islands might be deemed rather insignificant (except, of course, by those who live here). In cultural and linguistic terms, however, they are of distinct and undeniable interest as they are home to one of the strongest Gaelic-speaking communities in the world. (66 per cent of the population claimed Gaelic-speaking skills in the 2001 census, a figure rivalled only in other parts of the Outer Hebrides.<sup>17</sup>) As a small but well-defined geographical entity with sea borders on all sides they also have a clear and distinct rural community identity. There is little anonymity here. This may have both upsides and downsides for the residents, but it is an undoubted attraction for the language researcher to be able to observe the dynamics of language learning and use in a multilingual society in microcosm. After English and Gaelic, Russian may well be the third most widely used language here, being both the home language of a high proportion of recent Latvian settlers, as well as a lingua franca between Latvians, Poles, Bulgarians and other Eastern Europeans.

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<sup>17</sup> Gaelic used to be spoken much more widely across Scotland, but its history over past centuries has been one of seemingly inexorable decline, to the point almost of complete disappearance. However, irrespective of the vitality or otherwise of its use in a community context, it is widely held to have totemic cultural significance in a national Scottish identity, and significant efforts are now being made to revitalise the language, especially in the education and broadcasting sectors, and through affording it some measure of official recognition and promotion. There is further treatment of this topic with particular relation to this community in Wells 2011.

## Migration patterns

Significant migration into this community from outside the UK is, by and large, a recent phenomenon, dating back to the 2004 accession of Poland and other Eastern European states into the European Union. Unlike previous peaks in migration into the UK, which tended to be evidenced mainly in urban areas, Poles and other Eastern European nationals quickly made their presence felt across rural areas as well, including the Highlands and Islands. (Jentsch et al, 2007). In the Uists, workers from Poland, Latvia, and Bulgaria were taken on, mainly in the fish-processing, construction, retail and hospitality sectors. While some have moved on following the economic downturn, small but nonetheless significant numbers in a rural context have settled and put down roots, enrolling their children in the local schools and even building their own homes.

But in terms of total inward migration to these islands this latest Eastern European wave is by no means the whole story. There are also large numbers of English-speaking settlers here who have come from other parts of the UK. Some have come for work, for example with the rocket range or in schools or the health service, while others are attracted for 'lifestyle' reasons, such as the remarkable natural environment. Such 'internal migrants' far outnumber the recent Eastern European arrivals, and probably account for the bulk of the 34 per cent of the resident population that does not speak Gaelic. Some of them do try to learn Gaelic, however, which means that alongside the English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) interest there is a parallel Gaelic for Speakers of Other Languages (or, more commonly, 'Gaelic learners') movement, which provides an interesting local comparator.

Nor is any discussion of migration in the Hebrides complete without some mention of outward movement as well. It is a well-entrenched pattern for these islands to be net exporters of people, and ongoing depopulation is a serious concern. Young people tend to move to the mainland to complete their education or training, and only a portion return to start their own families here. Forward predictions are that this pattern will continue, failing some planned (or other) intervention. To the extent that inward migration, whether from the rest of the UK or elsewhere, can play a part in stemming the downward trend there is therefore a good instrumental reason for the host community to do its best to welcome incomers as new members of this island society.

## Community classes

Given their island setting and the distance from metropolitan centres, mainstream colleges have never found it easy to deliver the same level of formal or vocational training in the Uists as may be found in mainland cities or towns. This is as true of ESOL as of any other subject. The result is a greater reliance on, and community involvement in, voluntary or 'third' sector activity to try and fill the gap. In the case of ESOL, once the need became apparent after 2004, a local community-based training group named 'Cothrom' (the Gaelic word for 'opportunity'), which was already involved in delivering evening class activity on behalf of the local council's community education department (including Gaelic Learners' classes), took on this responsibility. Initially, this followed a common pattern with a very mixed group, in

terms of home languages and levels of English, meeting one evening a week for a couple of hours. Local employers were also approached to allow onsite delivery in an industrial language training model. Typically, this was hard to accommodate due to the length and unpredictability of working hours in a weather-dependent business such as fish-processing, for example.

As always in the voluntary sector, funding for tutors and other costs is also subject to change at short notice, making even medium-term curricular planning, for example to take Scottish Qualifications Authority ESOL certificates, hard to accomplish. Nevertheless, weekly ESOL classes of one form or another have been continued, with few breaks since their inception.

## Project work

The pattern of ESOL provision described so far probably differs little from what might be found in rural communities throughout Scotland and the rest of the UK, or indeed in urban outreach or community centres one step removed from mainstream colleges. Perhaps more distinctive is the bilingual community context already alluded to, and the part this has played in the development and delivery of complementary project work. This has been underpinned by the enhanced flexibility and functionalities afforded by new online technologies in comparison with more traditional teaching tools, and has served to support the ESOL cause as part of a language support and promotional strategy that seeks to involve the community at large. It is worth describing this in rather more detail in order to uncover its innovative aspects, prior to a summary consideration of its key characteristics in the general context of ESOL delivery and development.

Soon after starting its ESOL classes Cothrom entered into a materials development partnership with the Gaelic college, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (based on the Inner Hebridean Isle of Skye), to create a series of online video films for learners under the title 'Island Voices' (or 'Guthan nan Eilean' in Gaelic). The videos were designed to act principally as listening comprehension material for intermediate learners (roughly between CEFR<sup>18</sup> levels A2 and B2), delivering 'slices of Hebridean life and work'. The films were shot with a single camera and edited on a laptop computer entirely on location in the Uists, and were of two kinds. Firstly, short 'documentary' films introduced a local event, workplace, or community venue using a scripted voiceover commentary. While the topic dictated the content of the script to a large extent, the scriptwriter was also able to take the intended learner audience into consideration and adjust the language accordingly, producing a video equivalent of 'teacher talk'. Secondly and crucially, these documentary shorts were complemented with unscripted 'talking head' interviews with community members who had a close connection to the particular subject at hand. These gave viewers the chance to hear recorded items of authentic speech of the kind they would encounter outside the classroom in the community.

All clips were placed online along with word for word transcripts. A catalogue also listed each film made, detailing the topic, duration, and indicative level, with a

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<sup>18</sup> The Common European Framework of Reference is a set of graded levels (A1 to C2) for describing language skills.

summary of language content. Importantly, this was a bilingual project from the start, with equal weight attached to the production of both English and Gaelic materials. Initially a two-year project, it was deemed enough of a success to warrant extension and expansion, meaning that by the end of 2010, 150 separate videos (divided equally between English and Gaelic) had been produced, transcribed, catalogued and placed online. This amounted to over 12 hours of listening material, covering some 24 different topics, events, or venues, and including over 50 individual interview contributions from community members, mostly in the Uists but also including other Hebridean islands.

This is a significant body of work, and, as an audio-visual record of early 21st Century Hebridean life, it has attracted a wider interest than from just its primary language learning audience. Arguably, however, from the point of view of language learning and use, a greater significance lies not so much in its direct deployment as listening material in either a traditional classroom or self-directed learning context, as in the stimulus it has provided for community members – language learners or others – to take an active interest in exploring their language environment for themselves, and experiment with producing their own ‘user-generated content’.

In the early stages, under a parallel ‘IT literacies’ project heading, Polish and Latvian ESOL learners at a local shellfish processing plant undertook the production of a video about their life and work in the Uists as a part of their weekly language class. This is the video described in Scene one above. First of all they had to agree the contents of the film, and what sort of pictures they wanted – scenery, animal life, the places where they lived and worked, and particularly the different aspects of their work that they should cover. They then borrowed a camera to shoot the required scenes, taking it into their workplace, homes, and other significant locations. After that they edited the picture sequence together using the standard editing software installed on most personal computers. Finally, the learners themselves scripted the voiceover commentary (with some help from their ESOL tutors) and recorded the narration. The result was the engaging and revealing 15-minute film ‘Kallin Shellfish’, added as an extra<sup>19</sup> to the Island Voices collection.

At the same time, on the Gaelic side, another film in the original series which focused on a local day centre for adults with learning needs was re-edited, with one of the clients re-scripting the commentary and recording his own voice for the narration. In fact, as a bilingual, he was happy to repeat the process in English as well. Again, the new versions of the ‘Craigard’ documentary were added as extras to the online collection.

In both the above instances there were tangible benefits beyond the final products themselves. The whole process was an excellent learning experience, and not only for the students. On completion of the project the final report noted the following findings:

*The degree of tutor intervention in any particular project has to be finely judged, primarily according to the learners’ own learning styles, experience, and aspirations.*

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<sup>19</sup> [http://guthan.wordpress.com/extras/Scene 2’ – Grogarry Lodge](http://guthan.wordpress.com/extras/Scene%20-%20Grogarry%20Lodge) – is also accessible from this page, as are the re-scripted Craigard documentaries referred to later in this paper.

*The challenge for the tutor can as easily be to hold back and allow the learners time and space to experiment, as to intervene with suggestions or directions. Given the very wide range of creative, learning, and development options a multi-media/video project offers there is always the potential for individual learners to undertake one or more tasks, big or small, through which their particular needs can be addressed.*

*Learners have taken justifiable pride in the work they have produced. It is a concrete record of the efforts they have made, and the successful learning they have undertaken. Furthermore, it can also be seen as a positive contribution to the wider community, as easy dissemination allows other community members to learn more about individuals, organisations, or events around them. The project has been upfront and positive about the multilingual nature of the local community, and celebrated this diversity. Working in more than one language presented no significant operational difficulty. In fact, where there was need for translation it was often exploited as another literacy/language learning opportunity.*

In retrospect it might be argued with some justification that, by aiming straightaway at video production – technically a more demanding task than, for example, sound recording or simple writing – an unnecessarily high bar was set for learners to attempt in their first project. From these early beginnings, however, the Island Voices project has spread its net wider in attempting to encourage community engagement with the language development opportunities afforded by the new social media and mobile technologies.

The first step forward was the establishment of the Island Voices blog/website<sup>20</sup>. This acts in the first instance as an open gateway to accessing all the project videos. Beyond that, the blog also functions to channel news of classes or meetings and other updates about the project, encouraging interactive comments and discussion. It is bilingual and multimodal, enabling written, audio and video communication in both English and Gaelic, so beginning to reflect more closely the linguistic realities of everyday interaction in the community. And it provides a model which others may choose to emulate.

One sign of this is the subsequently established 'Voices' lifestyle page on the website of the Uists' local community newspaper *Am Pàipear*. Here, community members, including English and Gaelic learners, are encouraged to place samples of their creative work, which may be in audio or video format as well as written texts. Examples include written poems and recipes, audio recordings of songs and conversations, as well as slideshow sequences with accompanying musical or spoken soundtracks. Naturally, any of this material is also available for onward posting in individuals' own social media networks, and therefore productive of further online comment and interaction.

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<sup>20</sup> <http://guthan.wordpress.com/>

## Concluding thoughts

I would like to conclude by linking the ESOL work detailed above back to the bilingual community environment in which it takes place. A couple of quotes from a study of Gaelic in the community (Wells 2011) will help to frame the discussion.

*The ordinary Joe – nan tòisicheadh tu bruidhinn riutha mu dheidhinn bilingualism cha chreid mi gum biodh a' chuid mhòr aca ag ràdh hey hang on a minute, tha mise bilingual.*

*(The ordinary Joe – if you started speaking to them about bilingualism I don't think most would say hey hang on a minute, I'm bilingual.)*

*Tha an eachdraidh an aghaidh na Gàidhlig agus an eachdraidh, tha mi cinnteach, a bha a' cumail na daoine sìos, tha buaidh aig an sineach air na daoine fhathast ... Chan eil iad a' faicinn an luach air na rudan a th' aca gu nàdarra, na sgilean a th' aca gu nàdarra, an cànan a th' aca gu nàdarra – rudan eile that come with the package gun do rugadh is gun do thogadh tu ann an Uibhist.*

*(The history against Gaelic, and the history, I'm sure, that kept the people down, still have an impact on the people ... They don't see the value of the things that they have naturally, the skills that they have naturally, the language that they have naturally – other things that come with the package if you were born and raised in Uist.)*

Catherine, Isle of South Uist

*If I'm talking to someone like X (a bilingual acquaintance) we switch languages continuously, and you're not doing that always because you can't find the word in Gaelic. You're just doing it because it's just naturally part of who and what you are ... You're comfortable in both languages, and you just switch between the two ... It's almost as if the two things become one language.*

Donald, Isle of Benbecula

My basic contention is that second language teaching or learning (including ESOL delivery) is, *ipso facto*, an exercise in developing bilingualism. Such an exercise may be well executed, or it may not. To do it optimally we need to have an understanding of what bilingualism is, yet for many people (including teachers) who were raised English-speaking it may be beyond our own personal experience. Today's Gaelic speakers have largely been raised bilingually. Their experiences may usefully inform ESOL practitioners' conceptualisation of the work they do and the place it has in society, particularly when, as has happened in recent years, the bilingual Gaelic community plays host to a significant new influx of migrants wishing to learn English.

To summarise the community language environment, we have a largely bilingual host society in the Uists that is in a state of linguistic flux. There is an uneven balance between the two major languages, with high prestige English firmly established, while the traditionally stigmatised Gaelic struggles to maintain its position. A number of Eastern European languages are a recent addition to this mix, whose speakers are keen to upgrade their English language skills as a matter of priority. There is also an



interest in developing Gaelic skills on the part of some English-speaking monolinguals (as well as some migrants from outside the UK), and Gaelic speakers themselves may also lack confidence in their skills in that language – particularly in relation to reading and writing, for example. English literacy is also an issue for a proportion of English speakers.

The prevalence of everyday bilingualism, alongside a wide-ranging set of language support needs, has provoked a response, in the context of new technological possibilities, in the shape of the Island Voices project described above. It would be foolhardy to claim unalloyed success in all aspects of its work, but in a discussion of effective and innovative ESOL practice a number of key principles underlying the overall project may be worth highlighting.

Firstly, community-wide involvement is a key feature of the approach taken. Whether it be in terms of local venues and events that are the focus of materials production, or the willing participation of known local figures, *'bringing the outside in'* (Cooke and Roberts 2007) is an important part of the process. But beyond that, by opening up the guided creation of user-generated content to all members of the community, not just ESOL learners, in a co-operative venture, it is intended to convey an inclusive message – that we are all continuing learners, in one way or another, and that we all have something to contribute for the interest, entertainment, or indeed education of our neighbours.

This approach challenges the hierarchical division of language users into 'learners' and 'fluent speakers'. Insofar as the need or desire to upgrade one's skills through creative practice may be viewed negatively as a 'deficit', then it is a lack that is shared by all participants, irrespective of the means by which they acquired the language in which they choose to operate.

Interestingly, I find that the still commonly invoked distinction between native speaker and non-native speaker has far less traction in the Gaelic educational context than in ELT or EFL circles. Part of the reason for that may be that identifying with a single 'first language' can be problematic, as is the notion that language is necessarily the one in which you are most confident or skilled in all areas.

Another distinction that is elided is that between learning and use. Every new contribution to the Island Voices 'community archive' is a finished piece that stands on its own merits, whoever the creator. Learning may well have taken place during its production, with the learner themselves as the main creative force. But what results, however, is clearly an instance of language use with a tailored form and specific function or purpose beyond that of mere 'language practice' for its own sake.

The multi-mode functionality of the project also signals a recalibration of the balance of importance or 'prestige' generally accorded to speech *vis-à-vis* writing. In a Gaelic context, many fluent speakers of the language rarely, if ever, read or write it. Until quite recently the local education system has served the language very poorly. The days when speaking Gaelic in school was actively discouraged are still within living memory. Even now there is a dearth of reading material in comparison with what's available in English. One may speculate that this is not an unfamiliar

scenario in relation to the home languages of many migrant ESOL learners UK-wide. This may result in a lack of confidence in their spoken skills as well, which can lead into a negative cycle of low expectation and reduced use. The Island Voices project assigns equal validity to both the written and the spoken word, and affords online space to both, while profiling through its title the fundamental importance of the voice in language production. The message to all participants is that if you can say something in the way you want to say it, whether or not you can write it also, that is in itself a positive achievement.

Finally, the project actively and positively embraces bilingualism, seeking to exemplify a view of second language learning and use as a process of added enrichment of an already existing communicative competence rather than its replacement by another one. Cook (2002) talks of L2 ‘users’, rather than ‘learners’, and makes the point that people who have control over more than one language do not typically maintain strict boundaries between them. L1 exerts influence over L2, and vice versa. Donald’s quote at the beginning of this discussion illustrates a bilingual’s conception of his preferred speech habits rather nicely – *‘It’s almost as if the two things become one language’*. The point is that the expressive possibilities to which he has access through his bilingualism are just not available to a monolingual. Catherine’s quote, while underlining the educational work that still needs to be done to challenge ancient stigmas and encourage a positive view of bilingualism, exemplifies this enhanced flexibility of expression in its very structure, through the code-switching that runs right through it.

The display of ‘bilingual power’ that Island Voices provides delivers an important symbolic message to migrant incomers who wish to learn either English or Gaelic. For the ESOL learner in particular I would suggest it reinforces the reality and achievability of their chosen task of acquiring English as an additional language, as functioning bilingualism is plainly shown to be an everyday fact of life for most Uist residents. But beyond that, the project also underlines the healthy value of maintaining the home language as an additional and distinctive skill, a skill that should be worth passing on to the next generation. In so doing, it plays its own small part in achieving a societal acceptance of the legitimacy of using more than one language in our predominantly Anglophone culture. Such an acceptance may even now have come too late for many Gaelic speakers, but it may mean that Russian or Polish speaking children will feel able to display that aspect of their identity with pride when they enrol in the local primary school, rather than attempt to mask it, or feel shame in their parents’ presence in public. The more confident they are in their own full identity, the more they stand to make a positive contribution to the community around them.

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# Responsive teaching and learner centredness

# 13

## Responsive teaching and learner centredness

Sam Shepherd

In any discussion around lesson and course design and delivery in adult English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) there is an unquestioned assumption that the learner should be at the heart of the process. It can be seen in the English national teaching standards, according to which teachers should *'take account of ... ESOL learners' backgrounds, experiences, goals and aspirations'* (LLUK, 2007: 15). This is usually interpreted as teaching and learning which is based on the needs of the learners: more often than not drawn from a range of fairly repetitive themes: applying for and getting work, accessing local services and shopping, health, and citizenship.

In practice, however, the focus on integrative and socio-economic goals and aspirations means that the wealth of experience and knowledge ESOL learners bring to class is all too easily forgotten. This is particularly true when evidence that the learners have progressed against their learning targets is used as the primary focus for evidence of learning: Adult ESOL learners are more than the sum of their individual 'needs'.

The approach to course and lesson design is fairly rigid: some sort of assessment leads to the setting of targets, which in turn contribute to a scheme of work and from there, lesson plans driven by the achievement of teacher-written learning outcomes. An effective lesson, as described by Julka (2005), is one where planning in detail is an essential part of the teacher's skills, evidence of good practice. The lesson plan *'tells the learners what they will be learning and 'doing' in the lesson... [and that] lessons have a logical structure.'* (Julka, 2005)<sup>21</sup>

However, perhaps learner-centred teaching is more than a simple case of planning lessons from learner targets. Perhaps it is a more complex and challenging activity by which courses and lessons emerge out of the language and situations brought to the classroom by the learners – developing classes and courses where *learning opportunities* (Crabbe, 2007) arise in the language classroom, with the teacher taking advantage of these and responding to them as the class develops and grows.

### A class

This chapter grew out of a real class – a six week beginner ESOL group, at the end of an academic year in which they had had a number of teachers, and a number of

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<sup>21</sup> The response to this article by Simpson, et al (2006) is highly recommended.

different experiences. However, what was striking about the group, and which has so often struck me about low level groups in particular, is that the focus of the lessons and the schemes had been limited to a relatively small range of learner needs and interests based on a group of goals set and reviewed by the teacher. It was almost as if the needs of the learners were limited to their socio-economic rather than their wider existences. Indeed this kind of focus, while perhaps understandable at such a low level in terms of meeting some basic survival needs, is common across all levels of adult ESOL learning. For example the units of the Level 1 ESOL Skills for Life Materials are: Life in the UK, the News, Office Work, Looking for Work, and Citizenship and Community: very much themes of integration and social awareness, and two units focusing on work.

In terms of their linguistic ability, they were a mixed group of learners, ranging, as is often the norm in such a class, from an absolute beginner, with very low levels of language and literacy and correspondingly of confidence, to one learner who probably should have been put into a higher level class some months before. Languages and literacy varied widely: some having had a reasonable level of education in their own country, using the Roman script, others very little. Gujarati, Urdu, Arabic, Kurdish, Tagalog and Polish were the group's native languages. But all of them had a focus on developing some simple literacy skills at the expense of developing their wider skills as language learners and as individuals.

When I came to the class I therefore chose a different approach. Rather than lessons from their targets and goals, the lessons grew from a map of a fictional island representing themselves, from a handful of images of people, from the simple event of changing teaching rooms, and from the simple words 'I am...'. In most cases there was minimal planning, in some there was no planning at all.

## A snapshot

Attendance was good on this particular evening, compared to the previous week, and, as part of the routine taking of the register, I asked two of the adults why they missed last week's class. '*Last week, I am poorly*' said one. '*I am going to Manchester*' said the other.

The students had got their message across, the register was marked, and it was time to move on to the bulk of the lesson: a session on describing people based around a collection of pictures, drawn from the learners' individual targets as laid out in their individual learning plans, as is the norm in the adult ESOL context. It has to be said that had I been being formally observed, or perhaps with another group, I might have left it there and moved on to the bulk of the (admittedly loosely) planned lesson.

I chose not to do so. Instead, I started to explore the correct structures with the learners. This initially meant asking them some questions to see if any of the learners in the group could supply or identify the correct form. After some exploration and discussion, someone came up with the correct form for the first sentence: a proper, albeit tentative and slightly stammered '*was*'. This was a real achievement, and I responded with a smile, and praise. The learner had drawn from his fairly meagre second language resources and supplied the language the group needed. '*Went*' was

less quickly forthcoming, but when it was supplied there wasn't a silence, but rather a hum of some recognition and awareness. We moved on then to drill and practise the structures in these very limited contexts, giving the learners the opportunity to get familiar with the forms.

The lesson progressed from there: firstly, a brief writing task where learners wrote two or three sentences in response to the question '*What did you do last week?*'. Both the learners and myself were equally involved in supporting and providing feedback on the accuracy, in some cases with some further exploration of key points as they arose (for example, a wider range of verbs, regular verbs, etc.).

The learners then used the papers, suitably corrected, taken in and redistributed, as the basis of a speaking task – a mingle where the learners asked each other '*What did you do at the weekend?*' in order to find out whose paper they were holding. The possibilities here were still controlled, although it did throw up some anomalies – usually learners saying things they hadn't written on the original papers. These digressions and anomalies weren't dismissed or discouraged: contrary to what the learners may have felt at this point, and to what an inexperienced teacher may feel, the important thing here was process, that is the doing of the activity and the language generated, not the final outcome of finding the appropriate person. Guidance was given individually, or through peer support with a care not to interrupt the flow of communication.

After a pause, it was time to move on now to the more mundane messages of the day, which started with me asking the students what the date was, in order to write it on the board. '*Three May*' said the first learner. Using only facial expression, and by the simple fact of not writing the correct date on the board, I indicated that this was not accurate, after which, again using questions and peer support, we elicited the full spoken form, '*the third of May*'. However, unlike the past simple sentences of the lesson before, this was entirely within the learners' language range, and more crucially clearly represented a gap in their knowledge, and so we spent the next part of the lesson reviewing dates, names of months, names of days, and ordinal numbers. I did this through eliciting and peer feedback, but supported with my own examples of important dates (children's birthdays, wedding anniversaries). This led neatly onto getting the learners to talk in pairs about which dates are important to them and why. While this was happening, the learners voluntarily began to write the sentences down: an act which opened up a need to introduce possessive apostrophes ('*My father birthday...*'), leading to a selection of accurately produced sentences and utterances in a freer speaking task.

In fact, by the time I had passed on the various administrative information, I realised that it was then 8.20, there were only ten minutes of lesson left, and the group had missed their customary break as we were so very busy engaging with learning.

This runs counter to the accepted status quo of an outcomes driven lesson, planned in detail to achieve particular teacher-selected aims. There was no '*detailed, thought-through lesson plan, with clear aims and objectives shared with the learners*' (Julka, 2005) as required for a grade 1 'Outstanding' lesson. Instead this lesson, while still maintaining a structure of activities which developed the group's abilities and confidence, responded

in the moment to the need to communicate suggested by the learners. This is truly learner-centred. The learners want to be accurate and fluent, to understand and to be understood. The classroom context may have provided the stimulus here but the learners supplied the language, the content, the ideas: while the teacher took the decision to focus on that language, and to structure and guide learning in such a way that the learners can say what it is they want to say, and do so in a positive and useful way.

Questions remain, of course. How would something like this have held up under the scrutiny of the inspectorate? How learner centred is this? How did learning happen in these situations? What do we know about how languages are learned? And could any teacher do something like this?

## What does this say about language learning?

Let's go back to the first interaction in the class mentioned above.

**Teacher:** *What happened last week?*

**Learner 1:** *I am poorly.*

**Learner 2:** *I am going to Manchester.*

This was an impressive interaction, in which the learners demonstrated control over a number of linguistic elements. The learners are beginners, that is below entry level 1 on the National Qualifications Framework, with very low levels of literacy for the most part, and a limited range of language resources upon which to draw. There is a lot of work going into what the learners said. The word order, for example, is accurate as is the choice of lexis and the learners have demonstrated knowledge of subject-verb agreement (*I am...*). They have also correctly understood the situation. They have applied their knowledge of the roles of the participants, of the context, of the scripts associated with this situation, and provided the expected response. They have, in short, demonstrated a good degree of competence in discourse.

The most obvious error here is around the choice of tenses – it is certainly the error most likely to interfere with communication. The second case is doubly interesting, as this tells us a lot about this learner: that they have some awareness of the present continuous form, that they are overgeneralising the usage. It might be tempting to correct this into the present simple, but it is more appropriate in this instance to focus on the past simple form: it is what the learner was attempting to say after all.

What is even more crucial here, however, was my decision to stick with this point instead of returning to the main 'planned' point. There was no '*clearly expressed learning outcome derived from the learning programme and mapped to specialist curricula*' as required by teacher training qualifications and courses (Cambridge ESOL, 2008). It wasn't part of some wider plan, however loose that plan may have been. It was a purely functional piece of interaction, tailored to achieve a very specific communicative task, and achieved with a high degree of success.

However, this was a situation the learners had encountered before, would probably do so again, and one in which accuracy would be a clear benefit. The activity did start very much as error correction but as the work progressed it became very clear that



the learners were interested, wanted to know more, and would clearly be able to use the language learnt at a later date.

If we consider the second half of the lesson, exploring ways of saying and explaining dates, this opened a wide range of possibilities for some meaningful and supportive interactions, looking at real important dates, and making useful, usable and meaningful statements from them. Interaction is essential in an ESOL classroom, On a cognitive level, interaction provides a number of useful situations for learners – an exposure to the language being learned, an opportunity to form a hypothesis about how the language works, and an opportunity to test that hypothesis. In this case, for example, the learners in the class had evidently been exposed to was as a past form of be and had in some cases possibly begun to put that hypothesis together (roughly ‘when we say I am in the past we should say I was’).

Interaction then gives us what Crabbe defines as *learning opportunities*: ‘a specific cognitive or metacognitive activity that a learner can engage in that is likely to lead to learning’ (2007: 118). However, he also points out that such opportunities are rarely taken up by learners, both in the classroom and outside of the classroom – learners need to know when a learning opportunity has arisen and what to do when this happens. This is where the teacher comes in: Garton describes how teachers can take advantage of *learner initiative*, ‘an attempt to direct the interaction in a way that corresponds more closely to the interests and needs of the learners, as evidenced by the interaction itself’ (Garton, 2002: 47).

If we consider the beginner lesson above, the need to say the time, the need to explain what had happened in the previous week – all allowed learner initiatives drawn from the interaction in place in the lesson. Although in both cases the interactions were clearly teacher fronted, the approach used to analyse them was very much based around the immediate needs of the learners.

Although Garton argues somewhat against teacher frontedness in the setting up and selecting of these initiatives, it is sometimes necessary, as in this case with the low level learners, for the teacher to be more active in monitoring and guiding these initiatives. As learners become more accustomed and develop confidence in taking initiatives: bringing ideas, words, utterances, materials, etc. into the classroom environment, the teacher does not limit these, but encourages them. The long-term benefits of this are clear. If learners ‘do take the initiative, they can direct the interaction in such a way that it responds more closely to their needs and at the same time develops their interactional management skills’ (*ibid.* 48).

## What does this mean for teachers?

Thornbury and Meddings (2009) highlight the distinction between ‘pre-emptive’ teaching and ‘responsive’ teaching. In a pre-emptively planned lesson, the teacher has drawn on their knowledge ahead of the lesson, assessed the learners and made plans accordingly. There are handouts, presentations, and all the paraphernalia attached to that. This is an interpretation of learner-centred which requires the teacher to know all about the learners in advance of the lesson and put them into place using a raft of supporting documentation as evidence.

In a responsive lesson, a teacher does need to know about their learners, their linguistic strengths and weaknesses, and their motivations for doing the course: diagnostic tools, tutorials and so on play a role here. However, the reasons for knowing this about the learners is not to plan the lessons in a long-term pre-emptive, structured manner, but in order that, when the learning opportunities arise in the classroom the teacher is able to act on these and support learning by developing ideas and activities around not only what learners need, but what they want and therefore are more likely to value. *'Learner initiative almost always represents a learning opportunity, and should therefore be exploited whenever possible. Negotiated, or meaningful, interaction means involving the learner in clarification, confirmation, comprehension, repairing, and so on.'* (Garton, 2002)

The lesson described above suggests an approach which is close to the teaching unplugged, or Dogme approaches, where the teacher goes in without specific aims, without pre-selected target language, without a plan, except perhaps the very roughest of outlines to work from. These themselves developed out of a reaction to materials- and technology-led teaching (Thornbury & Meddings, 2009). It is what Scrivener calls 'the jungle path' –

*The starting point might be an activity or a piece of material, but what comes out of it will remain unknown until it happens. You are working more with the people in the room than with your material or your plan. I imagine a group of people hacking their way through the jungle towards new experiences, new learning. Sometimes the teacher may lead, sometimes the students. Everyone would be encouraged to think, make connections, ask questions and draw conclusions for themselves.*

(Scrivener, 2010: 6)

This is a challenge, even for the most experienced of teachers – many of whom like the lifeboat of the lesson plan. It is also a challenge where the teaching is set in a heavily audited environment, where the absence of a plan, or of clearly defined learning outcomes, can lead to punitive measures.

Cooke et al. (2007) offer a possible answer to the conundrum of the learning outcome requirement: a carefully worded *'Learners will be able to show progress in one area of speaking: not yet identified.'* (2007: 23). Such learning outcomes could be adapted to include a larger range of skills, perhaps, or to include a more global term even than speaking. This outcome would have held for the lesson described above – the learners did show progress in one area of speaking, and indeed one in writing.

As for the plan itself, perhaps it is hard to move away from the requirement of a standardised approach to lesson planning: in any context where accountability is key to funding, evidence of practice can be as much a requirement as the practice itself. However, there are formally 'plannable' elements here: the introduction to the topic, the sharing of prompts, a space within which language can develop, followed by opportunities to apply this language. There are also 'routine' elements to the lesson which can be incorporated: opportunity for learners to reflect at the end of the lesson, and/or the beginning of the subsequent lesson on work they had completed. This can all be formally planned, without specific reference to topic or target language except that which arises in the classroom.

Of course, not every lesson will provide such clear, well-defined areas of language to develop from as the ones described here. In some cases the learners may discover a whole range of different ‘language points’ to work from, but in others they may not identify any. In order to generate emergent language, then, the materials for other lessons described for this group (maps, pictures, ‘I am...’) also created extensive learning opportunities: at a number of different language levels *Finish this sentence: ‘I am...’* could generate a whole range of language and ideas. A single picture or video could generate all kinds of reactions and ideas. Learning in classes of this kind is supported not so much by materials and resources, but by ‘prompts’ – images, videos, texts, ideas and error. Learners might bring in their own prompts: questions, words, anecdotes, poems, leaflets, photos of friends, family, objects or scenes. Open collaborative writing on a theme, topic, or even just a selection of words and images, can also be a highly productive activity, producing wildly, even excitingly, different texts from the same responses within and across different classes. Learners respond to the prompts, personally, emotionally or simply descriptively and the lesson evolves from there, with the teacher watching and acting on the learning opportunities as they arise.

In order to do this, the teacher needs to create an environment where the learners are not passive or even reactive participants, but rather are seeking their own learning. This may not succeed at first: as with any change in approach or methodology, initial or short term success is unlikely. But given time and encouragement from the teacher, the learners can move beyond the teacher fronted stage – indeed, the group I was teaching for a time were only just beginning to develop degrees of independence from the teacher after six weeks.

Whatever the prompt, be it a piece of learner generated language, an image, or a leaflet, what is important is that the content and the objectives of the lesson are set by the learner. They are not objectives which tell the learner what they will be doing, but almost the complete opposite: the learner identifies in the lesson what they will be learning. The teacher and the learners work together to establish meaning and form (the *am/was and going/went* interactions in the lesson above, or the negotiations around the possessives) and they build from that. Learners can then practice the language in situ – look at the ways in which the language works in these contexts, explore them, experiment with them. They experiment and explore through communication and interaction – not just having a conversation but by having their interactions guided and modified by their peers and their teacher: *‘the teacher is one of the participants – one with greater competence and authority, of course, but only a participant – and as such cannot afford to ignore contributory discourse from other partners engaged in a joint venture’* (Kumaravadivelu, 1993: 13–14). It is this peer and teacher monitoring which provides feedback on how effectively the learners have communicated, and makes room for reflection and evaluation.

## Issues for the inexperienced teacher

This kind of lesson, with no carefully structured lesson plan or pre-prepared handouts, can be daunting for the inexperienced teacher. The lesson here relied to an extent on an internal bank of broad activity types (the mill drill and the variation

on the 'find someone who...' activity, for example), and, particularly for a low level group like this, that bank of tasks was useful. However, it wasn't essential. Meddings and Thornbury (2009: 20) provide a useful list of strategies for any teacher to work with in this kind of lesson, a list of ten 'R's. While all of them are valuable, the following three are probably the most crucial:

- 'Retrieve' the language as it arises, and make a note of it.
- 'Recast' it either through peer correction and discussion – simply 'Can anyone tell me another way we can say that?' – or by 'indicating "I know what you're trying to say; this is how I would say it."' (ibid. 20).
- 'Recycle' the language – get learners to use and to do something with the language in the original context, but also in other contexts. The more learners are involved in identifying these contexts, the better.

This kind of work doesn't require extensive language knowledge, although this helps, but rather a confidence in your own knowledge as a proficient language user. Nor does it require a great deal of knowledge of language practising tasks. Developing and role-playing language in different contexts – 'What might we say when...?' – or simply maintaining the continued discussion from which the original language emerged is enough. Formalised and structured practice has value, yes, and there are plenty of such activities which can be learned, experimented with and added to your inner toolkit. Most of these don't require enormous numbers of handouts, laminated cards and so on. However, endless practising of language often leads to little improvement: it is equally important for learners to notice the change in language and reflect upon that for learning to take place.

What is also crucial for any teacher working in such a learner responsive way is reflection. Reflection on what has happened and what could be improved, then taking action on that reflection. This could be a reflection-on-action, using one of the several structured models available, or more usefully, reflection-in-action – constantly evaluating the session as it unfolds, listening to and watching the learners, and guiding the lesson along.

## Concluding thoughts

Many of the approaches and ideas outlined above are not new, and may well feature widely in many teachers' practices. It can be challenging to balance the demands of an audit approach with this kind of reflective, responsive teaching, although the approach doesn't preclude the formal lesson plan or the setting and evaluating of learning outcomes. What is crucial, however, is that the learner-centred classroom practice takes as its starting point *not only* the pre-assessed and pre-planned content of the course or lesson, but evolves from the language and the ideas that the learners bring to the classroom. These ideas may come from 'real world' interactions or texts, procedural classroom interactions, or from any of a wide range of learner identified and produced errors.

The teacher encourages a class which is not afraid to speak, to try and to interact, where error is something to be valued and learned from. This is a classroom where the learner is not just the heart of the process, but the whole of it.

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# A 'social turn' in ESOL?

# 14

## A ‘social turn’ in ESOL?

John Sutter

### Introduction

‘Innovation’ always works against the tide of history, and the history – or, more accurately, histories – of English language teaching (ELT) are complex and often conflicting. In particular, there have been twin streams that in recent years have begun to run together, creating interesting synergies and oppositions around many aspects of teaching and learning including methodology, political and social orientation, and professional knowledge. These twin traditions are generally referred to as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and English as a foreign language (EFL).

There is no space here to discuss the disputed validity of distinctions between EFL and ESOL (see Williams and Williams 2007), but these days it seems possible to talk broadly about a ‘mainstream’ approach to ELT – which I will use as a general term, covering both EFL and ESOL, as well as EAP and other ‘specialisms’. Such an approach takes from EFL a preoccupation with the teaching of forms, or grammar, and the setting up of quite tightly planned lessons which introduce learners to new forms, and then afford them practice in their use. The string of government initiatives and policies intended to bring about the ‘professionalisation’ of ESOL teaching from the early 2000s onwards – such as the *Adult ESOL Core Curriculum*, the subject specifications, and the content of most, if not all initial teacher training courses and assessments – has meant that this type of approach has over recent years become increasingly reflected in ESOL ‘culture’ too, in the sense that ESOL teachers have had to come to terms with a greater focus on formal, written plans, and a more defined and structural syllabus.

Indeed, the various *Skills for Life* programmes, together with the new teaching qualifications (which in the case of ESOL drew quite heavily on EFL qualifications such as the CELTA and DELTA) represented something of a colonisation of ESOL by EFL. Prior to 2004, ESOL was often quite a ‘laid back’ affair. It was rooted in community provision and centred around a focus on ‘survival skills’ and a pastoral concern for the learner. However, the new Adult ESOL Core Curriculum, and the new professional qualifications for teachers led to a much more structured approach – both in terms of lesson planning (‘aims’ and ‘objectives’ began to become part of the language) and in terms of what is/is not taught. In many institutions, commercially produced EFL coursebooks became commonplace, introducing a more structured and structural syllabus.

Yet it is also the case that mainstream ELT could profitably draw to a greater degree on ‘traditional’ ESOL approaches and concerns: notably in terms of ESOL’s often acute contextual or social awareness of the learner’s lifeworld and life history and its recognition of the intimate relationship between language and literacy. ESOL appears to have a greater awareness of the ‘local’, in the sense of both the local context, and the individuality of the learners.

In terms of general approach, teachers working in EFL and ESOL contexts probably have more in common now than ever. They are likely to be using similar techniques (e.g. pairwork, groupwork, concept-checking), similar modes of lesson preparation (plans with aims or objectives or outcomes), and be teaching similar elements of language (for example verb forms, vocabulary and skills). As well as ‘mainstream’, such an approach could be described as ‘official’ or ‘sanctioned’: in the ESOL context in particular, inspection, observation and management regimes have combined to solidify the notion of ‘good practice’ in ESOL teaching in a remarkably defined way. ‘Good practice’ in ESOL seems to be most usually characterized by:

- clear planning, (with an emphasis on a *written* plan) which includes ‘objectives’, usually expressed as ‘target language’ or ‘skills’
- ongoing assessment and evaluation
- an expectation that something planned will have been ‘learnt’, and that ‘learning’ is observable (and sometimes measurable).

These elements seem to draw on the EFL tradition mentioned above – tightly planned and staged classes, ‘delivered’ to groups of learners. It is a methodology that depends to a degree on an expected homogeneity of learners in terms of social background, linguistic knowledge and language skills.

Yet ‘good practice’ also seems to include elements drawn primarily (though not exclusively) from the ESOL tradition:

- differentiation and personalisation – a recognition that ESOL classes are typically very non-homogenous, and an awareness of the often huge differences in personal histories and circumstances
- instrumentality – a focus on the immediate ‘usefulness’ of what is being taught (for example employability)
- pastoral concern and inclusivity – an awareness of the learner as potentially ‘needy’ or socially disadvantaged, drawing on ESOL’s history of provision for asylum seekers, refugees, and coping with traumatised learners.

‘Good practice’ then, seems to include potentially contradictory elements: on one hand a very ‘personalised’ approach considering the individual learner, their individual narratives and circumstances, and on the other, a fairly rigid whole class methodology.

So teachers have had to cope with the demands of paying careful attention to the idiosyncrasies of ‘second chance’ education, the emphasis on *preparing* people to learn, and supporting them as they gain their first experiences of literacy (in a second



language to boot), and to square this with institutional and ‘official’ expectations that all learners can and will acquire a pre-defined set of forms and language skills within a funding-driven timescale. This has meant that teachers (and learners) are often caught in the dilemma of trying to solve two ‘problems’: the need to increase learners’ social and human capital. Teachers are expected to address social goals (both policy and learner driven) such as ‘social cohesion’, improving learners’ life chances and their ability to communicate in ‘real life’ while at the same time delivering educational targets, expressed in terms of achievement rates based on exams which themselves are focused on idealised ‘skills’ and grammatical knowledge. It has proved extremely difficult for ESOL teachers to deliver on both counts.

It is perhaps not surprising then, that the tension created by these competing discourses, as well as institutional pressure to conform to ideas of ‘good practice’ has begun to produce in many ESOL teachers a reaction against ‘mainstream’ pedagogy. This has led many to look for alternatives.

Two ‘innovative’ approaches in particular seem to be capturing the imaginations of many ESOL practitioners at the time of writing: these are usually referred to as Dogme, and Reflect for ESOL – the first being an ‘import’ from the world of EFL, the second an adaptation of a long tradition in literacy teaching to the context of UK ESOL provision. The collisions between these converging influences from EFL, from literacy teaching within the current ESOL policy and practice context appear to me to be producing a ‘social turn’ (as yet incomplete) in ESOL pedagogy.

## From the EFL tradition: Dogme

The Dogme approach is so-called because it is based on the film making movement Dogme 95, set up by a group of Danish filmmakers – notably Lars Von Trier – who, according to Thornbury (2009:6), ‘...challenged what they saw as cinema’s dependency on special effects, technical wizardry and fantasy. The emphasis on the here-and-now requires the filmmaker to focus on the actual story and its relevance to the audience.’

Likewise Dogme ELT is:

*‘...a teaching movement set up by a group of English teachers who challenge what they consider to be an over-reliance on materials and technical wizardry in current language teaching. The emphasis on the here-and-now requires the teacher to focus on the actual learners and the content that is relevant to them.’*

(Thornbury 2009: 6)

A Dogme teacher’s attention then, is on the learners themselves and what they bring with them in terms of their experiences, preoccupations, personalities, knowledge, etc. rather than on ‘topics’ or language pre-selected by the teacher. The learner becomes the chief resource and ‘driver’ of lesson content. Thornbury and Meddings describe this approach as ‘teaching unplugged’, drawing a parallel with musicians performing unamplified, relying on acoustic instruments. This stresses the immediacy and unmediated nature of the classroom encounter; there is no reliance on a pre-written plan, though as we will see, ‘teaching unplugged’ does require careful teacher preparation and a great deal of expertise.

The musical reference in ‘teaching unplugged’ is significant, and the metaphor of teacher as jazz improviser is very apt for the Dogme approach:

*teachers, like jazz musicians, react to circumstances on the spur of the moment, ‘When I start off, I don’t know what the punch line is going to be’ (Buster Williams cited in Berliner, 1994, p. 218) ... the art of teaching, just like the art of jazz, is revealed only in “live” performance and involves the creativity of spontaneous, intuitive improvisation in the classroom.*

(Humphreys and Hyland 2002: 10–11)

Where many ‘mainstream’ teachers might talk about ‘covering’ a syllabus of language items and skills, Dogme practitioners speak in terms of *uncovering* language. Language is seen as emergent: it arises out of the topics, experiences and opinions voiced by learners, out of talk in the classroom.

The role of the teacher is clearly crucial here: the teacher needs to see, from moment to moment, how they can contribute to and expand the learners’ repertoires and address communicative needs as they arise. This is not a view of ‘learner needs’ as an individualised list of deficits, related to a pre-defined syllabus, but of moment-to-moment awareness of what a learner wants or needs to communicate or understand. The teacher is not ‘delivering’ as Meddings and Thornbury so memorably put it ‘*grammar McNuggets*’ (Meddings and Thornbury, 2009:12), i.e. pre-selected, pre-graded, (pre-digested?) grammatical items’: they are instead drawing on their own linguistic and analytic expertise to address affordances – moments of opportunity for meaningful teaching.

Here’s a description of one Dogme lesson from Carol Goodey, an ESOL teacher working in Scotland:

*It had been a busy day, I had arrived home at 5.00 p.m. and left again 15 minutes later. As I arrived at the library door, two of the learners were waiting for me. Inside, rather than sitting around our usual table, one of them suggested we sit in the armchairs arranged in a circle in the other corner. We sat and started to talk about our day. My contributions prompted questions from the learners that were just beyond their current language abilities, but by using gestures, other words and examples, they communicated their meaning, I supplied the words, wrote them on slips of paper, answered their questions and we continued.*

*As the other learners arrived, our conversation turned to jobs. I asked the learners about the jobs they had done in their life. We heard that one learner had just got an additional job. We found out that two of the learners had run their own businesses in their country, that two of them had skills to do jobs needed by another learner, and that two were interested in doing some part-time study. The learners are at different levels. When one learner talked, I focused on his use of the past simple, correcting or eliciting self correction. (He understands the concept but doesn’t use it much yet!) With another more proficient learner, I introduced the present perfect continuous ... Learners worked hard at expressing themselves, searching for the best way they could say something, and working with other learners to find the word or phrase they were looking for.*

A Dogme approach clearly raises challenges for lesson planning in term of any official requirement to produce meaningful pre-lesson written plans. Teachers still have to prepare themselves for Dogme lessons, – they will perhaps need to select prompts of some sort to engage learners, and to consider what language or communicative difficulties might arise, where a discussion might lead, and what individual learners are likely to bring/contribute. However, it is clear that, as with the jazz metaphor mentioned above, it is more meaningful to capture the lesson, the improvisation, afterwards rather than before, even if capturing is only a bureaucratic requirement.

Sarah Estop, an ESOL teacher working in community education uses a 'learner-friendly post-plan',

*In the middle of a landscape format A4 sheet of paper a learner writes the date. After a lesson I write key learning from the lesson (planned and incidental) in four boxes: new words, new sentences, new forms and things we talked about, using pictures as well as words where appropriate or helpful. I use this as the basis for revision at the beginning of the next lesson.*

She also photographs any board work as a record of useful language covered etc. – these photographs can then be emailed to her learners. There are also some key – and intractable – theoretical difficulties for language learning in terms of the applicability of much other 'official' discourse linked to planned or directed learning. Many ESOL teachers have qualms about the appropriacy of 'SMART' targets (targets that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-related) for language learners. The idea of SMART targets (a notion interestingly drawn from the world of business training) is essentially that learning is best approached as a conscious self-directed exercise. Learners, in other words should set themselves specific targets for learning (for example in carpentry, 'to master the dovetail joints'), ensure they find some way to measure their achievement of this target (to produce ten perfect dovetail joints), set a definite time limit ('in six months') check that these targets are achievable and realistic (perhaps ask/check with your teacher, assess your own other commitments, availability of workshops etc.). Such an approach may indeed be of benefit to 'content' subjects, where very definite objects of learning exist (such as 'dovetail joints'), but the evidence suggests that this approach may be of limited use for language learning (or literacy acquisition), subjects in which it is very difficult – if not impossible – to define narrowly the 'object' of learning. For instance, one may consciously learn the 'rules' of present perfect use, but still not be able to apply these in the 'real world' of effective communication.

Second Language Acquisition research tells us that language learning, far from being SMART, tends to be CASUAL:

- C Cyclical** – language isn't learnt step by step; items and skills need continual revisiting and review.
  - A Asymmetrical** – different skills and aspects of language may develop at different paces. 'Spiky' profiles – where a learner might have for instance advanced speaking and listening skills, but only intermediate reading, and elementary writing skills – are the norm rather than the exception.
  - S Social** – language learning is a social process rather than a measurable set of competencies.
  - U Unpredictable** – how exactly learning takes place, and under what circumstances it occurs is still very mysterious. Learners do not all follow the same path.
  - A Affective** – language learning involves the whole person – their emotions and identities affect and are affected by aspects of the language learning process.
  - L Local** – language learning is highly context-bound, both in terms of what is learnt, and how it is learnt.
- (Sutter 2010: 208–9)

Whether SMART or not, the requirement for teachers to produce Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) showing personal educational 'targets' for each learner has certainly led to an increased focus on the apparent 'objects' of learning: typically, the very specific linguistic items or skills listed in the curriculum. Similarly, the growing attention paid to written lesson plans (required at the very least for formal observations, and often expected by managers for every lesson) has also fed a preoccupation with the 'goals', 'aims and 'targets' of learning: *What exactly will be learnt in this lesson? What new forms/skills will the learner acquire?* The 'specificity' of learning – the drilling down to very narrowly defined sub-skills and competencies – has become part of official notions of 'good practice' and has made it difficult for ESOL teachers to plan or prepare for teaching in more holistic or global ways – or to respond to learners in the middle of a lesson, say, and move away from the 'planned' learning in a different direction. Yet for many ESOL teachers it is precisely such moments which offer real opportunities for learning – when a sudden unplanned event creates real engagement with learners. So, many teachers (and perhaps learners too) feel a conflict between, on the one hand, official or institutional demands for 'planned' learning, and on the other, authentic communication, which they know is a condition for language learning.

An awareness of these tensions, and a desire to maintain professional integrity, has no doubt contributed to teachers' interest in approaches such as Dogme. At the same time, the ESOL research literature (and the related subjects of literacy and numeracy research) has clear resonances and commonalities with the Dogme approach. Appleby and Barton (2008) for instance, emphasise the need for practitioners to relate teaching to learners' lifeworlds, experiences and existing knowledge.

In their report of an action research project, *'Turning talk into learning'* Cooke and Roberts (2007) found that many ESOL practitioners (and learners) were highly enthusiastic about using approaches which were more 'improvisatory' and which placed at their centre learners' own narratives and lived experience in order to 'uncover' a truly learner-centred language curriculum:

*I'm happy to take risks in a classroom ... someone will have something to say. Or something happens. There's always something ... today there was an accident and the roadworks and a crying student. Then it was a lost key. So there's a story behind everything. And that gives me a lesson.*

Carol, ESOL Teacher (Cooke, M and Roberts, C 2007: 22)

## From literacy – reflect for ESOL

If Dogme's central tenet is a focus on the 'here-and-now' and the learner as the chief resource for learning, Reflect for ESOL (RfE) represents a critical interpretation of this, with additional emphasis on the social and political context of learning. It is described by Moon and Sunderland (2008: 5) as *'an innovative approach to adult learning and social change that fuses the theories of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and participatory methodologies'*.

The aim of this type of approach in its original context of literacy teaching in developing countries was fundamentally emancipatory. The goal was to empower learners to realise their own purposes and uses for literacy so as to change their worlds to their advantage by affecting their immediate social contexts. Freire saw literacy as potentially an emancipatory or oppressive force, depending on whether learners took ownership of the purposes of literacy, or passively accepted the world as it is, and the uses of literacy offered to them. He contrasted 'banking' versus 'dialogical' views of education: one person (the teacher) 'acting on' others (the learners) to discipline them into particular ways of seeing and being in the world, versus teachers and learners working together, through dialogue, through 'lived experience' and through developing their own uses of literacy, to change the world for the better.

'Change' is a key idea here: Freire uses the term 'praxis' for 'informed action for change'. And this type of change, or 'praxis', is in his view, the whole point of education. As Auerbach (1992) puts it, such an approach *'...demands fundamental reconceptualisation of curriculum development ... the curriculum should emerge as a result of an ongoing collaborative investigation of critical themes in students' lives'*.

Central to RfE is an awareness of power dynamics and relationships, and the effect of this on participation and learning. As such, the approach requires a transformation of traditional classroom roles, placing learners at the centre of their own learning process. The teacher becomes facilitator, their role transformed from one of directing or transferring knowledge to one of facilitating, sharing, enabling and catalysing, as well as learning and reflecting themselves. The participants set their own agenda, identify their own issues, prepare their own learning materials and act on their analysis<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Adapted from the Reflect for ESOL Resource Pack: [www.actionaid.org.uk/doc\\_lib/reflect\\_for\\_esol\\_resource\\_pack.pdf](http://www.actionaid.org.uk/doc_lib/reflect_for_esol_resource_pack.pdf)

ActionAid has been the key organisation behind the development of the RfE approach. Over recent years, they have been working with UK ESOL teachers across a range of contexts, trying out, evaluating and developing Reflect resources and an ever-growing range of participatory techniques and ‘tools’:

*...prominent among these are visualisation tools (or graphics) such as calendars, maps, matrices, rivers, and trees, which enable participants to communicate their knowledge, experience and feelings without being restricted by literacy and language barriers. The construction of the graphic involves discussion on a key issue in the learners’ lives, generating vocabulary that is relevant and practical. ... The accumulated discussion, reflection and analysis of each issue leads learners to identify actions that they can take (individually or as a group) to improve their situation. These actions involve the practical use of oral and written language, thus strengthening people’s language use outside the classroom<sup>23</sup>.*

The emphasis RfE places on the use of visuals is interesting for a number of reasons: it offers a mode of communication that is not dependent on literacy of language level; it supports learners who may be visual, rather than linguistic thinkers; and it fits with modern theories to do with the growing importance multimodal communication (e.g. Kress 2010), and the emerging idea of ‘graphicacy’ as a blend of word, number and visual literacies. In the modern world, communication is increasingly achieved through a blend of different ‘modes’ rather than just through language on its own: web pages, printed texts such as magazines and advertisements, social networking apps, media such as film, television and music all combine language, visuals, graphics, and often gesture or movement to create meanings which are more than just the ‘sum of their parts’. The ‘hard’ technologies we use are themselves more and more a blend of different modes – computers, mobile phones, washing machines and cars all increasingly use icons, touchscreens, and visual representations of number relationships; so, for example, being able to ‘swipe’ a touchscreen on an iPad or mobile phone is becoming an important communicative skill. In order to operate effectively in contemporary society, it is important for learners to be able to interact in these ‘multimodal ways’ and to both interpret and create texts and meanings which go beyond pure ‘language’ or ‘literacy’. The visual tools of RfE engage learners in the kind of multimodal communicative work that allows them to produce artefacts that are more than ‘linguistic texts’ and which can themselves generate the talk, and draw attention to the language, or other communicative resources, needed to effect ‘praxis’.

The ActionAid website, and the resource pack cited above, is an extremely rich source of ideas and ‘tools’ relating to this approach. However, it is important to remember that this is not a ‘methodology’ in the traditional sense, nor is it ‘trademarked’ in any way. The key element of ‘participatory’ approaches is that they are defined by learners and teachers in particular places and contexts at particular times. As such they are deeply democratic and do not require any sort of ‘official sanction’.

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<sup>23</sup> Adapted from the Reflect for ESOL Resource Pack: [www.actionaid.org.uk/doc\\_lib/reflect\\_for\\_esol\\_resource\\_pack.pdf](http://www.actionaid.org.uk/doc_lib/reflect_for_esol_resource_pack.pdf)

Here's an example of how one teacher has used RfE:

*The topic 'life journey' was chosen by the learners during a class discussion about the reasons why they came to the UK. I chose to use the river tool metaphor as basis for my investigation because ... it is a powerful symbol for many people and visualising any process in the form of a river can produce creative insights.*

*In order to set learners schemata I asked if they knew of any famous rivers in the world and encouraged them to talk about them then make a list of these. We then looked at pictures of streams, rapids, waterfalls and learners were asked to match them with words. They were then provided with flipchart paper, coloured pens, magazines and other resources in order to create their rivers. At this stage learners were given plenty of time and space to reflect on the topic of their life journey.*

Erika Makone, ESOL Teacher

The activity generated large amounts of learner talk and interaction. Erika, who had set this up as part of an action research project, had taped some of the student talk in order to explore how she might build on the activity to develop learners' language in opportune ways relevant to the topic, and learners' purposes and language abilities.

**Student 1:** *Between the mountains is the beginning of my life. The mountains show my parents and grandparents who wait on my birth. The river shows my life. First I went to nursery school but it was bad time for me.*

**Student 2:** *What does mean that picture?*

**Student 1:** *It's rapid, when I meet a bad person.*

**Student 2:** *Met*

**Student 2:** *And everyone told me is...*

**Student 3:** *The wrong person and you shouldn't be with him.*

**Student 1:** *Yes, but I don't listen so I don't go on the bridge, on the happy time. I go on the second side, where is stuck, but I not listen.*

**Student 2:** *The wrong way? Here M tried to help M to phrase what she wanted to say.*

**Student 1:** *The wrong way. And this bad person have whirlpool in my life.*

**Student 2:** *Make whirlpool in your life.*

There are examples here of conversational features that might be developed, such as turn-taking, negotiated meaning, and co-operative meaning making, as well as interesting uses of metaphor, something that the Reflect visual tools very much support. All are present in this short extract of three students discussing one learner's 'river'.

As with Dogme, the RfE approach typically leads teachers towards an altered perspective on lesson planning, and the associated language of 'aims' and 'objectives'. Another ESOL teacher, Ann McDonald, addresses this explicitly in an RfE lesson in which she asked learners to draw maps of their neighbourhoods. It is worth reproducing her aims and objectives in full below, as they give a good flavour

of the overall 'ethos' of the RfE approach, as well as some of the tensions it produces in teachers (and learners) working in a 'mainstream' environment which makes particular demands on their practice.

Learners' objectives:

- to develop a sense of ownership of their neighbourhood as a rich source of content for language and literacy work
- for learners to initiate language and meaning drawing on their own knowledge and experience
- for learners to experience a gap between what they want to say and what they can say
- for learners to reveal perceptions of their neighbourhood and their need for language to express these, i.e. for learners to educate me the 'educator'
- for learners to reflect on their personal social position in their local area.

Teacher's objectives:

- to learn from students
- to facilitate learning and reduce teacher domination, and alter power relations in favour of learners by bringing their knowledge of the neighbourhood to the fore
- to navigate the Skills for Life curriculum demands, course books and available ESOL resources to enable students to communicate from within
- to improve my instruction giving skills
- to develop questioning skills (horizontal questioning, open questioning)
- to work on concept checking skills.

Ann carefully observed her learners at work as they drew their maps and interacted together, and then reflected on how both the learner and teacher objectives had been realised. She notices what is going on at a number of different levels:

- the **'linguistic'** aspects of what is happening – *'Stronger students expressed their knowledge using prepositions of place, lexis for neighbourhood and structures such as 'there is', 'there are'. Weaker students listened and responded by moving items .... wanted to say more than they could say – the gap was felt and the need for more adjectives was evident'.*
- the **'pedagogic'** aspects – what is needed of her as a teacher: *'I set up the activity well by locating the college and eliciting key features to provide a base from which students could take over. I still did not give instructions consistently and clearly for everything and I had to insert myself more than I wanted to at the beginning ... once the map building was over, and I moved on to the language point which I had anticipated (there is there are) I had opportunities to ask concept questions and get students to work out the difference between 'there is' and 'there are' in 'there's a hospital' and 'there are three mosques.'*
- the wider **social knowledge and experiences** the learners were drawing on: *'Students revealed socio economic knowledge – locating expensive areas, identifying bad areas, where it is noisy, where students get harassed, where they feel unsafe, where they shop, and later on in subsequent lessons, how Newcastle*



*differs from the villages where they predominantly come from. [It] revealed the social relations: students who lived in poorer and rougher areas were mostly asylum seekers, Bengali and Pakistani divorcees and widows, while those who lived in better safer areas are mostly part of secure families from the settled community.'*

- the playing out of the **tensions between an RfE approach and 'mainstream' ESOL**: *'my impulse to control was still strong and I had to consciously NOT interfere with some of the decisions students made about where things were, for example the post office ... while remaining within the Skills for Life curriculum demands I successfully sidestepped the ESOL resources and the course books ... students were in control of the information they were communicating about and I observed a feeling of confidence and empowerment.'*

Ann MacDonald, ESOL teacher

## Concluding thoughts

The initial appeal of both Dogme and RfE to many teachers often seems to be a matter of the methodological contrast with mainstream or official ELT, whether that comes from the ESOL Skills for Life materials or an EFL textbook. Both offer a relief and an alternative to, the strictures of a highly 'planned' pedagogy that additionally requires (and to a degree depends on) large amounts of bureaucratic labour – the production of plans, the detailing of objectives, the auditing of skills and forms, and constant assessment of learners. Additionally, both place the learner at the centre of the curriculum: in Dogme as the key 'resource', in RfE as the curriculum's primary generator and 'owner'. 'Official' or 'mainstream' practice also make many claims to 'learner-centred' teaching, yet experience seems to have taught many practitioners that this is far from the case with learners actually appearing to have very little say in what is taught and how it is taught.

It seems to me that Dogme and RfE both represent a '*social turn*' in language teaching pedagogy, very much in tune with the '*social turn*' in second language acquisition theory (see Block 2007). This is the idea that the processes by which a language (or literacy) is acquired are not purely cognitive – they do not just happen in individual minds. Instead, there is a recognition that language is a social, co-operative phenomenon, and that language learning and meaning making are themselves products of social contexts and interactions, rather than the application of a linguistic system by an individual mind to a particular situation. Indeed, in his recent book, Pennycook questions whether language meaningfully exists as a system at all, but is instead a product of social interactions in particular local environments (Pennycook 2010). Gee regards the mind itself as social, writing that '*human thinking is often distributed across other people and various symbols, tools, objects, and technologies. In navigating a large ship, for example, each sailor's cognition is attached to the knowledge of others (who have different sorts of interlocking expertise) and to the 'cognition' built into charts, instruments, and technologies*' (Gee 2000: 3).

This '*social turn*' implies that language teaching pedagogy ought to similarly focus on social, rather than individual aspects of language learning – that is to say, not the individual mental objects of learning, such as grammar systems, or individual skills, and how far individual learners have mastered these, but instead the co-operative

interactions and relationships which are ‘enacted’ through language. Likewise, there should be a focus on the local rather than the general – how things are communicated, and how things get done in particular contexts and communities. It is not that there is some general form of English that is to be ignored; the point is that all language is local, grounded, and arising from, the practices of particular people at particular times in particular settings. Dogme and RfE both seem to be pointing in this type of direction in pedagogic terms.

However, if pedagogy is moving in a social direction, there is yet to be a corresponding ‘*social turn*’ in the way language itself (and literacy) is analysed and understood by teachers. Aside from methodology, Dogme and RfE also have implications for the linguistic content of ESOL courses. By this I do not mean who chooses content, or even what the content is, in terms of linguistic items. It is clear that whilst Dogme and RfE are both approaches in which new language is meant to emerge or be uncovered according to the context chosen or suggested by learners, and by their emerging linguistic identities, this language is very much mediated and interpreted by the teacher and the teacher’s expertise. So as well as applying their expertise in terms of say, realising at a given moment that a certain bit of language would be useful to a particular learner, or that something linguistic needs to be explained, the teacher also has to filter this something through their own view of language, literacy and communication. I would argue that for most teachers, this remains a broadly traditional or mainstream view: broadly structural, sentence-level grammar, the traditional categories of vocabulary, pronunciation and the established ‘four skills’ of reading, writing, speaking and listening. As I have suggested above, the dominant view is still one of language as a system that needs to be learnt, and then applied.

For many, this is the only view of language – there appears to be no alternative. Much of this is perhaps down to the difficulty of breaking down the monolith of the established canon of pedagogic practice and grammar analysis used in teacher training courses. Yet the literature – and particularly the literature of *literacy* teaching – has moved on. In the ESOL literature, there has certainly been a recognition of the importance of discourse-level teaching, but it would seem that the insights provided by writers working in the field of applied linguistics and literacy, where a ‘*social turn*’ has certainly taken place<sup>24</sup>, have yet to find their way into ‘mainstream’ ESOL practice.


If ESOL practitioners can find a way to bring the teaching approaches suggested by Dogme and RfE together with approaches to language *analysis* that mirror the same social orientations and concerns, there is a real possibility that current innovations will produce something truly radical (and I think, liberating) in UK ESOL practice.

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<sup>24</sup> From the Hallidayean frameworks suggested by the New London Group the ‘social practices’ approach to language in the work of Street, Noran Fairclough and others (see Cope and Kalantzis 2000 for examples of all of these), through to the doubts of Pennycook and others as to whether language is a ‘system’ at all.

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